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TEACHER AND STUDENT WELL-BEING IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FINAL REPORT

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Summary

The unprecedented national COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 provided the backdrop for this study, which broadly explored the notion of well-being of teachers and students. Thirteen Year 4 to 8 teachers from seven schools in the Manawatū-Horowhenua and Greater Wellington areas participated in the project, along with 46 Year 4 to 8 students from four of the schools. The project focused on the experiences of teachers and students and their perspectives on the affordances and challenges of three distinct phases: the national lockdown, subsequent return to school, and the time they participated in the project (i.e., when COVID-19 was eliminated within the region). The data was gathered over a five-month period from May to November of 2021, through teacher interviews and student focus groups that allowed children to express themselves through of artwork and conversations.

Interviews with teachers yielded three distinct and interrelated themes. They were:

1. *Stepping up – Ngā whakapiringatanga;*
2. *Building Resilience,* and
3. *Reflecting and Recalibrating.*


In brief, teachers were overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation having to move teaching and learning online without much pre-warning but they stepped up to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students. While some were concerned about their own digital skills and competencies, they were more concerned about students and family circumstances, including isolation, job losses, financial difficulties, and lack of required digital technology for online learning. Daily online interactions with their students increased awareness of family circumstances. The teachers felt that one of the unexpected, but noteworthy, consequence of daily interactions during lock down was improved relationships between home and the school. The increased awareness of family circumstances allowed teachers to be more discerning in their support of students both during lockdown, and when they returned to school.

Teachers and students demonstrated considerable resilience during the first national lockdown, in returning to school, and as community outbreaks occurred in various parts of the country. Teachers engaged in a range of strategies that nurtured their holistic well-being: exercise, engaging in fun and meaningful leisure activities, identifying what they could control, and connecting with others. Student resilience was strengthened in part by how teachers supported student well-being: reassurance of their safety, integration of well-being into everyday teaching, and by fostering teacher-student relationships and a culture of care. Their school systems and leadership were a key factor in enabling resilience, by allowing students to focus more on quality time with their families during lockdown, and for teachers to focus on students' well-being when they returned to school, rather than rush to ensure that they catch-up' on missed schoolwork.

The lockdown provided the teachers with much-needed time for reflecting on the importance of their own well-being. They were able to afford themselves some 'me' time and reprioritising their personal and professional self. The benefits of having the time and space to focus on their personal well-being, enabled them to support their students to become increasingly resilient in the face of the ongoing presence of the pandemic.

Given teachers focused on their well-being and offering flexibility of learning online, the key inter-related themes from the students' perspectives were:

1. *Worry about safety and changes;*
2. *Restrictions and isolation;*
3. *Freedom and autonomy;*
4. *Friendship and connection;* and
5. *Quality family time.*



Students across the schools appreciated the quality time that they could spend with their families and pets, and the flexibility that lockdown offered in terms of their learning. At the same time their well-being was affected by feeling anxious about the effects of the virus on their near and dear ones, living in New Zealand and overseas. They felt very isolated from their peers, and some found the social distancing on return to school rather taxing. There was a nagging sense of nervousness of catching the virus among the students, which was tempered with an impatience to be in proximity of their peers. Although getting back to school routines was difficult after the long break, the joy of reconnecting with peers soon provided them with a sense of 'normalcy,' where could learn and play together. At the time of the focus groups in each school, students felt that the worst was over, and they felt 'safe again.'

In comparison to other international studies where children and young people's well-being was noticeably affected, the students in this study seemed to have been relatively pragmatic and resilient, and overall they seemed to have gone with the 'flow' in terms of their learning and well-being. In many ways, it would not be a remiss to say that the importance of haoura of both teachers and students seemed to have been thrust to the forefront by the pandemic.

However, we would like to add the caveat that the study was conducted in the Lower North Island region of Aotearoa New Zealand, which was not impacted by repeated community outbreaks and ongoing school closures like some other regions.

Introduction to the project

Well-being is a fundamental requirement for all living beings, in fact our entire ecology. Developmentally, it involves promoting personal and professional identities and a sense of belonging to a community (Price & McCullum, 2015). The project took a holistic view of well-being informed by Whare Tapa Whā (Mason Durie, 1994) that encompasses the balance between *taha tinana* (physical health), *taha wairua* (spiritual health), *taha hinengaro* (mental health), and *taha whānau* (family health). This holistic well-being of teachers is also strongly foregrounded in Aotearoa New Zealand Teachers Council's kaupapa (Teachers Council, n.d.) and for students it is an important part of the New Zealand Health curriculum in schools. However, the COVID-19 pandemic took well-being into a whole new realm on a global scale. The disruptions and losses it has caused across all walks of life has been and continues to be colossal. From an educational perspective, schooling was abruptly interrupted as schools hastily pivoted to online learning. The epitome of schooling which was until now deeply enshrined within the walls of classrooms with intense teacher-student interactions and relationships, became distant and remote overnight. This social emotional distancing between teachers and learners thrust the well-being of students and teachers into the forefront, as both groups grappled with the lack of physical proximity and connectedness.

Increasing concerns for teacher and student well-being during early phases of the pandemic served as a catalyst for the project. Consequently, the project focused on teacher and student well-being during the initial lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand, in the early half of 2020, and in the few months afterwards. It must be noted that Aotearoa New Zealand had a relatively short lockdown period of six weeks from March 23rd, 2020. During 2021, as we undertook the project, there were other shorter lockdowns in various parts of the country. It was a sublime reminder that returning to what was once 'normalcy' is unlikely to be a reality in the foreseeable future for schools, teachers and students.

Teacher and student well-being

Schools and teachers play an important role in supporting and fostering young children's social-emotional skills and well-being every day. Research in New Zealand following the Christchurch earthquakes showed that schools play a critical role in balancing the effect of trauma and disruptions in the lives of children (Mutch, 2018). Literature tells us that it is the daily emotional interactions and responses between teachers and students that contribute to teachers' well-being, which in turn impacts the social emotional adjustments and learning of students (Education Review Office, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roffey, 2012; Spilt et al., 2011). Additionally, in the past couple of decades, a focus on holistic well-being of humans has gathered momentum in the Western world and has also become an integral aspect of education. In New Zealand in particular, there has been a marked increase in understanding the importance of children and young people's well-being (e.g., Education Review Office, 2015; Lawes & Boyd, 2018; Macfarlane et al., 2007; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2019). Well-being is now an integrated part of the New Zealand Health curriculum in schools and concerted efforts have been made to develop resources to support student well-being (e.g., Education Review Office, 2016; Rohan, 2017; Welch et al., 2021). An international report published by UNICEF focused on improving the well-being of children and identified education as one of the key determinants of children and young people's overall mental health and well-being (UNICEF, 2020). It emphasised that attending to the well-being of children in their early school years leads to positive life outcomes (Goodman et al., 2015).

Alongside the well-being of children, there is increasing evidence to focus on teacher well-being (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Cherkowski & Walker, 2018; Roffey, 2012; The Education Hub, 2019). Teacher well-being is critical, as it has a direct impact on student well-being, teacher-student relationships, and the quality of teaching. Supporting teachers' well-being is not only about reducing their stress levels or promoting resilience (British Psychological Society, 2020; Hone et al., 2019), but more importantly providing a supportive context that enables them to function in an emotionally positive space (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Teacher well-being is shown to be affected by their emotional competence and self-care, the extent of social support available to them, and a range of school-related factors, including workload, leadership practices and school culture. Teacher well-being is also inextricably intertwined with individual aspects such as motivation, independence and professional efficacy, and collective aspects such as professional contributions and relational interchanges with students and peers (Liu et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic situation thrust the well-being of teachers and students further into the spotlight. As Andy Hargreaves (2020) argues, well-being has become even more critical as a prerequisite for learning and achievement of children and young people. As *loco-parentis*, teacher well-being is an integral aspect of students' well-being.


Well-being of teachers, children and young people during the pandemic

Aotearoa New Zealand's national lockdown affected both teachers and students. Teachers were catapulted into the deep end of online teaching in virtual classrooms. Not only did it expose the digital capabilities of teachers (Klapproth et al., 2020; Sokal et al., 2020), but it also had the potential for them to be judged and scrutinized by parents and caregivers (Ewing & Cooper, 2021; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020). At the same time, teachers had to also deal with their personal circumstances, support the learning of their own children (if relevant), and care for other family members (Klapproth et al., 2020). Additionally, although the move to online teaching was demanding of teachers' time, they were concerned about the educational and psychological well-being of students due to lack of everyday prolonged contact that they would normally have (Flack et al., 2020; Folkman et al., 2022). Teachers were equally stressed when they and students returned to school. They feared for their own health and the health of their family members due to the potential of being exposed to COVID-19 infection through the children. Some teachers saw themselves as frontline workers as they were interacting with children from many 'bubbles' on return to school, causing anxiety that affected their well-being (Pressley et al., 2021). The resurgence of COVID-19 and frequent community outbreaks following the initial lockdown in early 2020 added to the uncertainty and concerns of teachers and students. There were issues around non-attending students, as some parents were apprehensive of sending their children to school due to fear of community transmissions. Given this, the pandemic and the lockdown situations undoubtedly added a new dimension to teacher student relationships and their mutual well-being.

The unprecedented lockdown of countries world-wide at the beginning of the COVID-19 Delta outbreak had the potential to test not only teachers' capabilities for digital teaching in virtual classrooms, but also students' psychological, emotional, and social abilities to stay motivated and work independently in isolation. As shown below, a literature review of studies undertaken during the pandemic indicates that children were often resilient and adapted well to the remote learning environment as they adjusted and came to accept disruptions, although they missed everyday peer interactions. The literature also shows that there were wider socio-economic factors that played a significant role in ways they adapted to remote learning, which in turn had an impact on their well-being and learning.

The unprecedented lockdown situation also had emotional effects on families and children (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Kalil et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020), especially children with pre-existing vulnerabilities, health issues, anxiety, and previous, or concurrent experiences of trauma, abuse, or neglect (McCormack & Future Curious Limited, 2020). The lockdown restrictions that prevented physical movements of people meant that ordinary social supports could not be accessed. In a large overseas study with over 10,000 participants, parents/carers of children aged 4-10 years reported that over a one-month period in lockdown, they saw increases in their child's emotional and behavioural difficulties, including children feeling unhappy, worried, and clingy (Pearcey et al., 2020; Shum et al., 2021; University of Oxford, 2020). The Oxford study highlighted the importance of prioritising the well-being of children during their readjustment of returning to school.

A study of more than four hundred children aged 5-17 years in Switzerland, Canada and Estonia found that most children experienced increased quality time with families and strengthening of relationships; a type of "intergenerational solidarity" (Stoecklin et al., 2021). Children and young people were positive about having more independence and agency to chart their own time schedules to study. The move away from the confines of classrooms and some of the social stressors of school life were viewed positively by children, particularly those in primary schools (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Children's Commissioner of Wales, 2020; ERO, 2021). Students in high schools mostly enjoyed the freedom of self-directed learning and flexibility, but there were some who were unable to self-manage their learning time and missed the proximity of their peers (Children's Commissioner of Wales, 2020; Yates, 2021). There were some children for whom family situations such as job losses, lower educational level of parents and availability of adequate digital technologies made the home environment stressful and anxiety provoking (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2021; Children's Commissioner, 2020a; 2020b; ERO, 2021; Kalil et al., 2020; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020.). Across a number of European nations, children and young people reported an increased workload and not being able to keep up with the pace (Di Gioia et al., 2020), compared to New Zealand, where parents, particularly Samoan and Māori parents appreciated the measured pace and contextual understandings of teachers during the pandemic (ERO, 2021; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020). Learning during the pandemic was seen as liberating and providing more flexibility. In some instances, children and young people thrived on the individualised nature of learning and regular guidance from teachers (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Di Gioia et al.,



2020). The study by Bubb and Jones in Norway showed an improvement in children's digital literacy, increases in parent involvement, and improvement in home school relationships.

Alongside this, studies undertaken during and immediately after the initial pandemic lockdown also highlighted concerns around well-being of children and young people due to factors other than schoolwork. Their well-being was affected by socio-economic factors precipitated by the pandemic, e.g., parental job loss (Children's Commissioner, 2020). Families whose children were supported by breakfast clubs and meals in schools' schemes were found struggling to provide adequate food for their children (Nottingham City Educational Psychology Service (EPS) & Southend Educational Psychology Service, 2020; Patrick et al., 2020).

In USA there was a large decline in the physical and mental well-being of single parents and those with younger aged children, resulting in poor behavioural, mental, and physical well-being of their children (Patrick et al., 2020). Issues such as depression, sleep impairment, anxiety and aggression were also found among Dutch children and young people during the pandemic (Luitjen, 2021). Emotional and behavioural changes such as increased distractibility, impulsiveness and clinginess were observed in low-income families in a study in UK that tracked the mental health of school children aged 4-16 throughout the COVID-19 crisis on a monthly basis (Pearcey et al., 2020; Shum et al., 2021). Increased emotional and behavioural issues were more noticeable among younger children during the remote learning period, while ages 11-16 were found to be more stable (Shum et al., 2021). Interestingly, another study in the UK that examined the impact of the pandemic on girls aged 4-18, found that girls were concerned about their own physical well-being, and even more worried about the health of other family members; they also felt socially isolated (Girl Guiding, 2020). The social isolation led to boredom of girls aged 4-14 years especially (Girl Guiding, 2020). Therefore, it was unsurprising that several studies identified that students missed the social interactions with peers and collaborative learning environment. In some countries, teachers facilitated the development of new online social groups as part of learning (Stoecklin et al., 2021), but in most instances students, particularly high school students, felt isolated from their peers (Children's Commissioner of Wales, 2020; ERO, 2021; Luitjen, 2021; Yates et al., 2021).

In general, increased irritability, boredom, restlessness, and attentional difficulties became more pronounced in children and young people (Saladino et al., 2020). Although there were identified needs for counselling support to enable children cope with the isolation (Di Gioia, 2020), elevated levels of parental anxiety meant that mental health supports for children were not readily accessed (Children's Commissioner, 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2021).

In spite of wanting to be back among their peers when various lockdowns ended, children tended to experience a high level of anxiety in returning to school. As well as having to 'catch up' with schoolwork, there was a genuine fear among children of the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 (Nottingham EPS & Southend Educational Psychology Service, 2020; Phoenix Educational Consultancy, 2020). The importance of social distancing that was an option in New Zealand schools was not foregrounded as a safeguard measure in many places, although students in the study by Phoenix Consultancy group identified staggered transition to schools to minimise health risks. Students in these studies were mindful of the importance of teacher well-being as well as their own.

Overall, a review of the literature shows that many children and young people seemed to embrace lockdowns and remote learning positively. Lack of contact with peers was of most concern, but at the same time children and young people were worried about the contagious nature of COVID-19 and were anxious in returning to school. As a number of the above studies noted, the pandemic resulted in and exacerbated existing socio-economic difficulties and stress in families, resulting in a cumulative impact on children and young people, and their well-being and learning. However, the agency, flexibility and quality time as a family was cherished by many children and young people in the literature.

Research Aims

This project aimed to understand the experiences of both teachers and students in terms of their well-being as they adjusted and came to accept disruptions as a new normalcy. It was critical to hear teachers' and students' perspectives on their well-being, especially as the pandemic continues and the future remains uncertain. Given the interdependent nature of teacher student relationships, teachers are likely to experience challenges to their well-being in the short and longer term that can affect the relational climate in the classroom (Spilt et al., 2011). Consequently, any challenges for teachers and students' well-being must be better understood and responded to.

Methodology

The project was a qualitative study, which collected data through teacher interviews and student focus groups. Theoretically, it was underpinned by Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (2000), that emphasises the sociocultural and *macro-level* context (e.g., norms and policies) and the interdependent relationships within and between the *microsystems* of teachers and students in the context of COVID-19. It was also firmly situated within the framework of children’s voice with its strong imperative that children be consulted to express their own points of view about their well-being, learning, and other matters that affect them (Lundy, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2010; UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). We used a multi-method approach (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017) to elicit student voices.

Recruitment

The initial intent of the project was to recruit 20 Year 4 to 8 teachers and associated students in 10 schools in the Manawatū-Horowhenua regions. An invitation with the project information was e-mailed to all primary and intermediate schools in the Manawatū Horowhenua region in February 2020. Reminder e-mails were sent three weeks later.

Subsequently in Term 2 of 2021, the geographical location was expanded to include Tararua districts and the Greater Wellington region, which resulted in obtaining more teacher participants, but this still did not meet the target of 20 teachers. So, further invitations were sent to teachers in primary schools in Taranaki and Hawkes Bay in Term 3, 2021. The widening of the geographical regions resulted in a total of seven school principals consenting for their teachers and students to be involved in the study. Interested teachers from these schools were sent information about the study, with a request for two teachers volunteers from each school. In four of the schools, caregivers of Year 4 to 8 students in the classes of participating teachers were sent an invitation for their child to be involved in focus groups. The final student participants were those whose parents provided consent. These students also received information about the study and gave their own consent.

Participating schools

The seven participating schools were all from the lower North Island. The schools were small to medium in size and were located in both rural and urban areas. Table 1 shows their characteristics.

Table 1. Participating Schools

Schools	Type of School	Decile	Location	Roll	Demographics
School A	Full Primary	3	Urban	>300	Māori > 45% Pasifika < 10%
School B	Full Primary	6	Rural	>100	Māori >20%
School C	Full Primary	7	Urban	>450	Māori >15% Pasifika < 5%
School D	Full Primary	5	Rural	>100	Māori >20%
School E	Composite (Integrated)	7	Urban	>100	Not available
School F	Contributing	7	Urban	>350	Māori >20% Pasifika <10%
School G	Contributing	3	Urban	>100	Māori > 50% Pasifika > 5%

Teacher participants

The teacher sample consisted of 13 teachers from seven schools. While all were teaching Year 4 to 8 students in 2021, during 2020 they taught a range of year groups from Year 2 to Year 8. Teacher experience ranged from 4 to 35 years. Three teachers identified as Māori, nine identified as New Zealand European and one identified as European/North American.

Student participants

There was a total of 7 focus groups, with 2-8 participants in each group (mean focus group size = 6 students). Four of the focus groups included Year 4 students (n = 19 students), one focus group included Year 5 and 6 students (n = 8 students), one focus group included Year 6 or 7 students (n = 5) and two focus groups included Year 7 and 8 students (n=14). A total of 46 students participated in the focus groups. The proportion of boys and girls was similar. Ethnicity was not recorded.

Table 2. Number of students participating in creative activities for each period of the pandemic, by year level, and school

School	Lockdown	Return to School	Now (Time of Study)	Year Level
School A	1 2	3 1	2 4	4 7 & 8
School B	1** 2		5	4 7 & 8
School C	1 2	1 4	2 2	4 5 & 6
School D	No Focus Groups			
School E	8 2	1	2	4 6 & 7
School F	No Focus Groups			
School G	No Focus Groups			

** One student had to leave due to a foot injury.

Procedure for data gathering

Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2015) provided a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of their experiences and the impact of the various stages of the pandemic on their personal and professional self: during lockdown, returning to school and the period up until when they were interviewed. Interviews were 45 to 90 minutes long. All interviews were audio-recorded.

The student focus groups were facilitated by at least two researchers. To increase the reliability and validity of data, a multi-modal data gathering method (Cowie, et al., 2010) was used. This included group brainstorming of their experiences of well-being *during lock down*, *on returning to school* and *currently* (at the time of their participation), followed by a choice of creative expression of experiences, e.g., drawing, collage, writing a poem. Some students discussed their creative pieces with the researchers and/or their peer group. Photographs of their work were taken with the students' permission and their brainstorming and subsequent discussions were captured for analysis by audio-recorders and note-taking. These focus groups ranged from 45 to 75 minutes.



Data analysis

Data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were returned to teachers for checking. Once approved by respective teachers, two interviews were coded independently by the researchers to ensure inter-rater reliability. The reliability was further tested by independent coding by a research assistant not involved in the data gathering. All coding was undertaken using NVivo 20. All researchers then worked together to aggregate codes and identify themes within the framework of the research objective around teacher student well-being during and after the initial COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. As teacher participants were recruited at different times spanning three school terms in 2021, it was deemed that the short survey of impact of participation in the project would not result in meaningful data that could be aggregated.

The focus group transcripts from students (which included discussions of their creative pieces) were analysed along similar lines. In addition to identifying themes, illustrative creative pieces of students have been included as part of the findings.

The project obtained full approval by the Massey University Human ethics committee application number SOA- 20/60.

Findings

This section reports on the thematic findings from teachers and students across the three phases of *lockdown*, *return to school* and the *time of their participation* in the study.

What Teachers told us

Three strong themes emerged from the teachers' perspectives of well-being – Stepping up Ngā whakapiringatanga; Building Resilience and Growth; and Reflecting and Recalibrating. Several subthemes were identified for each of these themes.

Stepping up Ngā Whakapiringatanga

One of the six principles of the Effective Teaching Profile for Teachers (Bishop & Berryman, 2010) is Ngā whakapiringatanga, which is about teachers creating an emotionally and physically secure learning environment for students. Both, during lockdown and at the point when students returned to school, the teachers' primary focus was on the well-being of their students. The suddenness of the lockdown left them with little time to ensure that there was minimal disruption to students' virtual learning from home. While the teachers knew their students well in terms of their emotional, social and academic strengths, the pandemic and the daily online learning made teachers more aware of individual family circumstances like never before. This understanding resulted in teachers going beyond their role to support their students' learning, by becoming a source of support for the wider hardships experienced by some families. They had to accommodate and adapt their expectations of formal academic learning in the interest of the well-being of the students and their family circumstances.

We have a lot of families that struggle financially, that have a lot of things going on. And I don't think there was a lot in terms of having someone to turn to if you really needed help. Because of my background like I could, you know, forward them like, this is where you can apply for extra funding, this is where you can find out more information; if you need a food bank or if you need food, these are the people you call. We ended up spending a lot of our time creating resources for and like delivering them to parents. (School A, Teacher 2)

I tried to provide a lot for my students and parents in terms of looking after their well-being. (School A, Teacher 1)

In acknowledging families' financial hardships during lockdown, teachers had to vary and alter their teaching times and approaches, with some spending more time than a normal school day in terms of their online availability. The nature of work assigned to students varied from practical activities such as baking biscuits with their family members, to a more structured format of having weekly tasks set by their teachers. One of the major disparities observed by teachers among the families in their communities was the affordability and accessibility to learning technology, which impacted on the learning of students who were not sent home with school devices. The teachers were very mindful that not all students had access to a computer and for many the device was shared with other siblings. Creative approaches were used to deal with this.

I knew that my kids most of them don't have a computer at home. I knew most of them didn't so I had to make paper stuff for them to craft. If they do have a computer at home, they've also got five siblings. So their older siblings are going to be using that [laptop] 'cause it's more important. (School E, Teacher 8)

The ones with no device got like no Internet, got a proper big hard pack and the others just got a book, some pens and pencils, a glue stick, scissors and then they got a few sheets, nothing huge. So then we expected, like everyone set up, it meant we coordinated so we weren't all on hui at the same time, because we had multiple children [households]. (School G, Teacher 13)

In my classroom I probably had about 30% of kids that had access on like a steady daily basis on a device that they could access their learning. At least, 15 to 20% had zero device access at all. So being able to connect was extremely hard and knowing that there's such a wide range in terms of not only trying to support them through an educational situation, but supporting their families and supporting their well-being. (School A, Teacher 2)

We printed off so much paper to give to the kids who didn't have a computer. I think we printed 20 books and so that was a lot of paper. (School D, Teacher 7.)

To ensure that students' emotional well-being was maintained during lockdown, teachers became creative in motivating and engaging their students to learn. This was a delicate balancing act as their creativity had to be tempered with the knowledge of family circumstances and well-being. In fact, the increased knowledge of their students' personal circumstances even continued to influence the pedagogy of teachers when school reopened following a 6-week lockdown period.

I tried to tie it into what was happening at that time. I was, I called it moment teaching. In other words, you took a moment, and you'd use it next day. (School E, Teacher 9)

Creativity, that's key when you're stuck on your own, it really is, 'cause it's just a different way of you know channelling your energy that critical thinking comes from being creative. I think getting more of those types of lessons up and running would be ideal for me. (School A, Teacher 2)

Juggling priorities

Teachers were constantly trying to manage school-based expectations. During lockdown, they found it stressful to manage their own expectations and also at times the administrative requirements of their schools, while also trying to be flexible and creative to engage their students online. Concern that their students would fall back in their reading and writing was foremost in some teachers' minds, so some teachers felt that administrative demands were unnecessary.

And so, there was quite a lot of pressure to do meetings and so I'm like, but what are we meeting about? I am one that doesn't like meetings and doesn't like doing things just for the sake of them, it needs to be purposeful. (School E, Teacher 8).

I spoke to some teachers that said that they were in front of their computers for 10 hours a day, and they came back completely and utterly burnt out from trying to you know, be everything to everyone. (School A, Teacher 1)

While the lockdown period stretched the boundaries of the teachers' roles and responsibilities, the impact on teachers' well-being was more pronounced as the schools reopened following the lockdown. There were still many uncertainties in terms of community contacts and tracing (or lack of), and teachers often felt that they were like frontline workers. It made them anxious, apprehensive, and cautious; they constantly had to remind students of hygiene procedures of washing hands and avoiding proximity.

I was still a little bit scared because we are frontline. We are dealing with lots of people all day every day --for me if anyone had a cold I was like - I think you need to stay home. So yeah, my well-being was good, but also very weary, and we are still very weary now. (School A, Teacher 2)

You're worried every time someone came to school sick, and I was more worried because my nephews were at XX School and my brothers would get to different supermarkets. My niece is at a day-care, and I was like, if one of us goes down we take down all of that. No, no, I can't afford to get sick. (School D, Teacher 7)

Returning to school after lockdown was in many ways an emotional time with increased anxiety among both teachers and students, as teachers continued to feel responsible for supporting student well-being and their own well-being. Due to the constant media focus on the global repercussions and aftermath of COVID-19, there was a heightened sense of awareness and concern among them. In some instances, the families had kept their children shielded from the grim and gloom of the pandemic reported on the media, so these students were getting to know the bigger picture through their peers. Teachers were very aware of the consequences of not following safety guidelines and were constantly on the vigil to ensure that they kept themselves and their students emotionally and physically safe. The emotional interdependence was foremost in the minds of teachers as they eased back to some sense of normalcy and routines, following the initial period of lockdown.

I think one of the most important things that teachers don't realise, in terms of well-being is, if your well-being as a teacher is off, it's gonna affect your whole class. So, I think putting yourself first, which as teachers we don't tend to do because we've got 25 kids in front of us. But I think it's, it's stopping to think actually, how am I doing, am I okay, what do I need to fill my bucket before filling others. (School A, Teacher 2)

On the flip side, student well-being absolutely affects you as a teacher. It breaks your heart; it breaks your heart when you know there's horrible stuff going on and you can't fix it. We're in a profession of caring and, you know, building relationships, it's hard not to take that, like you want to create your little box of distance, but you can't, because you see these kids every day, you love them like they're your own and when you're, you know they're suffering, it's hard. (School A, Teacher 1)

In spite of the emotional roller coaster rides and anxiety about students' and their own welfare concerns, the teachers identified some positive lessons, as well as some missed opportunities for increasing the preparedness of students and teachers in the event of similar situations occurring in the future. There was a sense of doing things differently and conceptualising learning differently based on their lockdown experiences and the students,' but actioning such reframing remained rhetorical as business as usual took over.

Less stress. I have more time for myself, less catching up, doing meetings and PD and paperwork and teaching as inquiry. (School E, Teacher 8)

One positive that I think our principal did really well too, as I think when we just got back into lockdown, instead of doing a mid-year report we've done like a sort of like a conference, joint report night, which I remember being like, thank goodness!! Because the last thing we want to be doing is coming back from COVID-19, and then kind of just assisting our kids to see where they're at and what we're going to report. So that was well managed. (School B, Teacher 3)

I sort of thought, wow this could be really cool, we can actually change what a classroom looks like, what a school looks like, how it works, but all the conversations kind of led to nothing. Which I think made it feel really hard for the rest of the year because there had been all this potential stuff, that then never happened. So yeah, I just felt quite frustrated and maybe overlooked, or undervalued. (School G, Teacher 13)

Attunement to family/whānau circumstances

The initial lockdown provided to be a period in which teachers strengthened their understanding of the enormity of challenges faced by some families in their school community, exacerbated further by the lockdown. Families in low socio-economic groups had multiple levels of difficulties such as crowded households, lack of affordability and access to digital resources, situations that were compounded by job losses during the lockdown, the impact of which teachers began to understand in real time.

Family relationships were quite strained during COVID-19, and because a lot of our families are quite large, and a lot of our families are from a very low social-economical background, that put a lot of pressure on families and kids, so that it's a stress and that stress doesn't go away with COVID-19. But COVID-19 definitely made it much worse. A number of our parents lost their jobs during this time so that came with its own uncertainty. (School A, Teacher 1)

Some kids are trapped inside their house. And you can tell they didn't like that. (School E, Teacher 8)

The isolation of families was a cause of concern for teachers, as was the heightened anxiety among students who had close relatives overseas.

A lot of our kids are international kids, right, a lot of kids have families in other countries and dealing with the seriousness of it. We've had families that have [relatives who have] died from COVID-19 in our classroom and other countries, so it's been quite a horrific experience for a lot of them. (School A, Teacher 1)

In being attuned to their families and communities, the teachers could also see some advantages afforded by the lockdown situation, which helped to reduce some of their concerns around isolation and lack of socialisation for their students.

Kids are having a whole lot of, and parents are having a lot of special one to one time, and I got to see and hear about afterwards or sometimes, you know, online or whatever the awesome things that they were doing together, and that actually bit was a really positive for my well-being as well. Just to know that yeah, they're getting a lot of family time, which is very important. We talk about here about Whare Tapa Wha you know, and whanau is really important part of it, so that was definitely a pro. (School B, Teacher 4)

The positive effect would be if they had parents who took on roles okay well, I'm going to teach you how to cook during this time or I'm going to teach you how to garden during this time because they realized that actually their children's education is partially their responsibility as well and not just school. (School B, Teacher 3)

Teachers felt that some students had quality time with their family. Being able to see them in a different context for a lengthy period gave them a more holistic picture of their students that could inform their pedagogy.

Flexibility and availability

Being attuned to the hardships of their families and communities, the teachers made significant adaptations and accommodations to their students' engagement with their academic learning. This included being available online for longer periods of time to ensure that students could maintain a routine to their daily activities. For some teachers it meant being available for teaching more than what they would in a normal school day.

I think I was available more online to my students than I am during the day in a class day. Simply because some of our students only had like one Chromebook per family and they have more than one sibling so depending on what time they were allowed to come online for our zoom sessions, depended on when I had to be available for them.

So instead of just a 6-hour day when you're in class it was more like nearly a 9-hour day 10-hour day. (School A, Teacher 2)

Initially parents found it difficult to stay on top of their children's everyday learning, so teachers mitigated this by scaffolding and making the tasks more manageable. Reciprocally, the parent community were appreciative of the extent that teachers were going to make lockdown learning smooth and practical as possible for their children.

Several parents are negative, several parents said to me "this is so difficult, ----I'm finding it really difficult, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do here, etc. So, then I sat down, and I had to be like okay, I have to pretend I'm a parent now and so I would give out instructions that I emailed the parents as well. (School E, Teacher 9)

The feedback that I got was kind of like "hey thanks for the work you're sending through my kid is doing it by themselves, I'm not checking in on them." (School F, Teacher 11)

In some instances, teachers were accepting of the fact that parents were not teachers, and that academic learning was not always the focus for some families and their students. They also understood that some parents could not spend much time with their children, which had an impact on children's well-being when they returned to school.

I think if you've got parents that are working. I know that there were some kids that were on devices for a lot of the time, and I don't, I don't know if I agree with that being a really positive thing. And I know that their kids' reading has gone backwards and stuff like that and well-being is part of it. You know like, they came back to school and some of them felt like a bit on a back foot from it. Whereas other kids have zoomed along which, yeah, that's a bit harder for some kids. (School B, Teacher 4)

Awareness of ongoing welfare concerns

Teachers' concerns about families of their students were ongoing post lockdown. Having seen first-hand the various needs of families and whānau, teachers were constantly thinking of ways in which their community's well-being could be supported and maintained. Families of their students had dealt with the lockdown in idiosyncratic ways depending on the impact it had on their financial and emotional well-being. However, teachers had a deeper understanding of the nature of supports that would be beneficial, whether it was from the government, or social services agencies.

Definitely resources and funding. Also having more social services. We really struggle in this area in terms of having social services, things like therapists, counsellors, food bank. We have a lot of families that struggle financially, that have a lot of things going on. And coming back out of lockdown having a lot more social services in terms of counselling, not only for parents, but for the tamariki because a lot of them have literally gone through some serious trauma during this time, and there's nothing. (School A, Teacher 1)

Having the government invest more in our kids --I mean like now we have a food in school program that we didn't have before. Now there's a program in place to actually help with that so things are moving in the right direction. (School E, Teacher 8)

Stress and pressure on teachers

As much as lockdown had some adverse effects on the families and communities of their school, it was also stressful for teachers. In some instances, it was to do with their personal life situations and anxieties.

So, lock down was very difficult. I had not long been back from England, so I was still living with my parents, which is not something a 35/34 year old wants to be doing. But my brother was also going through a breakup. He was also living with my parents, with his three children. And he's an essential worker because he was at the supermarket. So pretty much it was me home-schooling his kids trying to teach my class. (School D, Teacher 7)

I think my well-being was probably worse leading up to it, not only from a New Zealand perspective but from our international perspective because at that time [countries my family was living] were probably about a month ahead of us in terms of what was what was going on. So that was probably a lot more frightening for us, knowing that our families are dealing with this, and we have zero control over it, and be trying to prep ourselves for what's happening here. (School A, Teacher 1)

In addition to their own sense of anxiety and growing concerns about the pandemic, teachers also felt that there were under scrutiny by parents that was stressful and put them under pressure.

You know you just talk, in lockdown, you just talk to such a wide variety [of families], and you just feel like they have so much more access to you. And just you know so much more like, they have so much more access to like what you're doing, and so then naturally they will be happy or unhappy with it. You know you just kind of learn to brush things off a bit more. But I still think that's hard. (School F, Teacher 10)

So being a parent, I know that I don't mind if my parents have a gap or miss out, because it's been, like everyone's done it so I'm not going to make a big deal. Whereas I think some families and some teachers made a big deal about it, what happens, they are going to miss out on four weeks of learning, the flow is broken. Um so I guess that pressure transferred onto us from other people in the team or from families. (School, F, Teacher 11)

As teachers have a *loco parentis* status, there was a genuine concern in not being able to connect face to face with students, which spoke volumes of the inter-relational aspect of teaching and learning.


Because of lockdown because they're spending less time outside of that [school]environment I've got five days of five and a half hours that they are outside of that environment and being able to interact; being able to talk to people about anything they're concerned with; having a teacher who cares about them, who's also formed that dyadic relationship with them, and they didn't have that during lockdown, so you're more concerned during COVID-19. (School B, Teacher 3)

On returning to school following lockdown, teachers continued to be in a heightened state of preparedness to ensure that both their well-being as well as students' learning was not jeopardised yet again.

We had a scare. I think it was last year at some point, where we within a week or two, something happened there was like exposure, not too far away from us. And we thought it's gonna happen again. And I spent an entire day prepping. Every kid had books, every kid had an iPad, like I had it all written down, whose kid is going with which iPad. So, for my well-being, it was being prepared, and knowing that if this happens tomorrow, my kids have enough resources from an educational perspective but also from a well-being perspective to go home. (School A, Teacher 2)

Summary

Ako, or the act of teaching and learning is defined by the reciprocal relationship between teachers and students. Before the pandemic, education was positioned within the four walls of a classroom or in more flexible learning spaces within the school environment. However, the pandemic totally turned the whole notion of learning upside down and left both teachers and students to quickly adjust to ways of learning not known before in primary schools. Teachers world-wide have been bearing the brunt of economic and social disparities and its consequences on children's education for more than two decades. They are often seen to take on multiple roles such as a social worker or counsellor, that can be emotionally draining (Richards et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic took this extended role of teachers to unprecedented heights. This study showed that the imbibed duty of care of putting



students' welfare before their own by teachers was played out on a grand scale during lockdown. The teachers did not stop at just being online teachers for their students, but also found themselves extending their support to distraught parents, so they could support their children's learning and navigate the various unexpected challenges such as job loss or the stress of being front line workers. The quick turn of events leading to lockdown meant that there were no guidelines for teachers and parents around what students' day-to-day learning would look like. Perhaps this was blessing in disguise as it allowed for teachers to take a more bespoke approach to the online learning of students. They did not particularly identify any tensions in monitoring students' academic progress during lockdown, which contrasted with the national survey undertaken by the Education Review Office (2021). But the fundamental expectation that learning would be online was in itself a stressor for families, especially when children did not have a device of their own and often had to share it with other siblings. This digital deprivation alone placed a lot of pressure on teachers in terms of what they could expect of students, forcing them to be more creative in their planning, and flexible with their hours of availability for the students. Although digital literacy strategy embedded in the New Zealand Curriculum meant that most schools were digitally savvy, shifting entire day-to-day teaching online took digital learning to new heights. The consequences of this shift to online learning highlighted the disparities among many families and communities in terms of their access to technology (ERO, 2021). The government's efforts to provide stable internet connections to rural communities was of some help that was acknowledged by teachers, but the lack of personal devices was a major source of barrier for students' learning.

A compounding factor was the heightened anxiety caused by the unpredictable and unknown aspects of COVID-19 both globally and in New Zealand (Bubb & Jones, 2020; ERO, 2021; Flack et al., 2020). The economic cost of lockdown resulted in people losing jobs which affected the well-being of families of some students quite considerably. Teachers were appreciative of the quality time some of their students had with parents, but equally there were very mindful of the financial hardships that impacted many students' learning and well-being (ERO, 2021; Kalil et al., 2020). Teachers worked around family priorities, even if it meant that students' learning was compromised. All this while, teachers were also feeling pressured to be under the gaze and potential judgment of parents every day. Teachers were flexible and accommodative, but some felt stressed with longer working hours to fit in with the needs of their students and their family situations. Contrary to findings in a study of 329 public and private elementary school teachers in USA (Pressley et al., 2021), teachers in this project had a more cordial and understanding relationships with their parent communities. As a result, teachers' efforts to be flexible and compassionate were noticed and appreciated by parents. A significant outcome of being attuned to the needs of families meant that teachers became more aware of the realities and struggles of their students, which had a profound impact on their pedagogy. This quote summarises teachers' conscious and deliberate focus on students' well-being.

I mean, kids come to school to learn. So, it is part of it, but it is only part of it, not all of it. I guess one change that I did do this year in relation to last year, and related to well-being was, you know, having morning and end of day check-ins, that you come into school, and we just, you know, first five minutes, "How are you feeling?" "What's on top?" you know? "What have you been up to?" What did you get up to yesterday after school. (School C, Teacher 6)

Despite these adjustments, the teachers were unanimous in talking about the time and space to themselves afforded by the lockdown. They felt that their life moved to a slower pace, and they had more "me time", which had a positive effect on their well-being. They were very aware of feeling more anxious on returning to school as they felt vulnerable to be exposed to students. But what consumed their interactions was their internalisation of the students' lived experiences that they had seen and heard during lockdown that influenced their practices as they settled back to school routines. They were aware that their well-being had a profound impact on their students (Split et al., 2011). There was a deliberate focus on positive learnings during lockdown including appreciating and acknowledging the quality time and learning that happened within families during these times. (Bourke et al., 2020). The experiences of students and their own insights into the family contexts enabled teachers to be more responsive to the needs of the students and not lose sight of the ongoing needs of their community.

Building resilience and growth

While experiences and well-being seemed to vary considerably, it was evident from the teacher interviews that many teachers and students showed remarkable resilience during the first national lockdown, when returning to school, and as community outbreaks appeared and cleared in various parts of the country. Resilience can be defined as “multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity” (van Breda, 2018, p. 4). True to this, teachers and students reportedly experienced adversity and challenges (specific to COVID-19 and sometimes more generally), and they used strategies that helped them to attain better-than-expected outcomes. Processes were multilevel, with some being intrapersonal and others occurring across the social ecology and through broader systems. In this section, teacher and student resilience, and the factors that contributed to it, are discussed. As will become evident, the resilience of teacher and students was not an automatic outcome but a result of deliberate action, relationships, and support from others.

Stress of COVID-19 and teacher resilience and growth

As discussed above, teachers described various personal and professional stressors and challenges over the course of the pandemic: pressure to suddenly prepare students for learning when the country went into lockdown; adapting to distance teaching; anxiety about the dangers and uncertainty of COVID-19 for themselves and others; juggling work and important family responsibilities at home; and concern about student well-being, engagement, and learning. Despite this, many teachers adapted to challenges, identified opportunities afforded by the situation, and experienced enjoyment, at least at times.

Yeah, because there was a lot of time where you are kind of like, yeah, my role has changed, and it doesn't feel like you're doing your job as well as you should... So that was a big impact and yet positive things come from it... After bit, it took a bit of time, but I'm letting go of the kind of academic side of things and like what's my role as a teacher you know, that had changed completely... And so, yeah, that was an adjustment but once I got that, it's I don't need to worry if I haven't seen everyone do their assignments online... Maybe they're practicing cooking more, you know, and that's not something that I can kind of go A+ but it's still really good learning. Um, so yeah that was a bit of a relief. (School B, Teacher 4)

As well as adjusting to challenges, opportunities were identified and enjoyed, particularly through lockdown.

I think both teachers and students saw it as kind of like a hauora thing when we were going into lockdown. Um, just with that slowing down, being able to reconnect with your family and stuff, that time that you normally wouldn't have. (School F, Teacher 12)

So, music and sewing are two things in my life outside of school that I probably haven't made time for in the past three years. And so, I had all the resources there and so I was able to spend some time on those projects and those hobbies. Yeah, and fitness... And it gave me the opportunity to spend some more time on the farm and you know, country is my comfort zones, so it was nice to have that outlet as well. And cooking, I never cook, like I never have time. It was nice, I was all done by 4pm so I could make dinner and dessert. Not a 15-minute whip-up or something. Yeah, I think if anything, it definitely opened my eyes in relation to the appreciation of what aspects are a necessity for life. (School A, Teacher 1)

Some teachers reported experiencing growth through navigating various challenges of the pandemic. For example, preparing for a sudden, unprecedented lockdown meant that teachers felt better prepared to do this in the future. They also learned how to better teach and engage with students virtually – what activities worked best or needed to be adapted in other lockdowns. As will be discussed in the section on reflecting and recalibrating, teachers also reconsidered and reprioritised their understanding about what it meant to be a teacher.

While resilience and growth were apparent in the teachers' accounts, it was clear that personal circumstances sometimes exacerbated the difficulties they experienced. For example, teachers with young children at home sometimes struggled with the pressure of their teaching role while also looking after and overseeing the learning of their own children and/or other family members' children. Also, some went into the pandemic feeling relatively burnt out, and one teacher was grieving the death of a very close whānau member. Despite the stress and strain, many teachers carried on the best that they could:

No, you just kept going, just keep going. (School D, Teacher 7)

You know my husband had died... Parents dropped things at my gate and the children were wonderful. 'We're thinking about you and praying for you.' I'm miserable, but hey, I kind of thought what else am I going to do? So, I just went back into teaching, and I think that was actually really good for me. (School E, Teacher 9)

In summary, teachers showed strength in adapting to circumstances, enjoyed affordances of lockdown, and forged on when times were tough.

Teachers' well-being strategies

While external forces impacted on teacher well-being, teachers monitored their own sense of well-being and showed insight into strategies that could be used to support this. Teachers provided examples of a range of well-being strategies that worked for them to sustain their wellness during this time. These strategies ranged from exercise, doing things they love (e.g., arts and crafts, gardening, watching television), and finding time for themselves. Notably, these strategies were more likely to be engaged in when their own whānau and school were supportive.

I would take time out. Every day I walked, and I was running on my treadmill, and I don't really run, and I just got into the groove and just I really enjoyed it and I think I struck quite a good balance. (School G, Teacher 13)

I was doing daily walks with my dog and that was feeling really good and that sort of thing. (School B, Teacher 4)

Teachers also engaged in hobbies and things they loved to support their well-being.

Like, in lockdown I got into gardening. And it's really a positive, yeah. (School B, Teacher 4)

The first lockdown I discovered that I love crocheting and I taught myself how to crochet... So that was really good, it gave me some, you know? (School G, Teacher 13)

I just, I really love movies so I pretty much lock myself in my room and watch movies or watch TV shows just to be relaxed a little bit. (School D, Teacher 7)

Spending time doing activities that were enjoyable and good for well-being really emphasised to teachers the importance of having time for themselves.

It's also made me have more focus on so now actually starting to have some 'me time' and focusing on myself. That's what has come out of this for me actually. Being a parent or a teacher, you give everything to everyone, but now I've taken a bit of me time. (School A, Teacher 2)

Teachers also became self-aware and attentive to their emotions. Acknowledging how they were feeling enabled them to engage in strategies to improve their well-being.

Because we lose our self-awareness. We lose that being true to ourselves and to our emotions and we tend to function on a kind of facade if you know what I mean, and you keep it happy, a happy appearance, but really, you're not feeling like that, really your feet just like paddling really fast. So, I think for all of us, to be honest with our feelings and saying this is how I am feeling today. And then after that it's like, good we've spoken about that, now what are we going to do to get better. It's also about, you may feel like that right now, we have talked about that, you need to park it and now we need to move on... It is definitely a school wide thing. We always promote positive thoughts, positive health, and well-being for all of our staff and tamariki. (School A, Teacher 1)

With potential danger and uncertainty adding to anxiety, a couple of teachers used cognitive techniques like focusing on what one could control or calming the mind through meditation.

There's two of us in our family who if we get, it could be quite dangerous... But then I try to think 'I can't control it; I need to stop worrying about it and just focus on what things I can control.' (School G, Teacher 13)

It was a big anxious time. But once I got into the mindset that I can't be in control of what the kids are doing at home. I can give suggestions, I can try and find a way to reach the parents to touch base, that took a bit of pressure off, made me a bit more relaxed. (School B, Teacher 4)

I think taking it back to simple things like meditation. You know because it makes you focus on yourself, all about calming the mind. And in those times, you really have to think of peacefulness. (School A, Teacher 2)

Teachers also pointed to the importance of maintaining relationships, which often had to be adapted during lockdown. Checking in with family, colleagues, and friends was valued.

It was a struggle because I am a people person. And my family are not in [this city], and family are a massive part of my life, and my friends. I mean, I made it work, you know, we created family challenges each week and you know, and had regular video calls. (School C, Teacher 6)

In summary, teachers used a range of physical, leisure-based, cognitive/psychological, and social strategies to sustain their well-being through stressors faced during the pandemic.

Other supports for teacher well-being

In addition to using specific strategies, teacher wellbeing was supported by school leaders and students' families. The unprecedented nature of the lockdown meant that there were no guidelines for what was expected of teachers. In these situations, teachers felt that they had the backing of their school leaders whom they could turn to in times of need.

We were having lots of discussions about, you know, how are you reaching the kids and I haven't even heard from such and such. What am I supposed to do? And in a way it was really good, and I think we had a zoom with the staff and the Principal was really good because she was going, "you can't control what you can't control" ---- she was worried about our well-being, but she was also saying, well-being of the kids and the whānau needs to be a top priority. (School B, Teacher 4)

It was good sharing the class last year with the deputy principal who was my team leader, and she'd been here for four years already. So, if I had an issue, I could just message her like, I've got an issue, or I don't know how to do, how to do it like, what do I say? And she will like, I've had them for the past two years, I can take over. (School D, Teacher 7)

Staying connected to their whānau and community of learning was an integral part of their personal and professional well-being during lockdown. But the ultimate satisfaction and reward for teachers in terms of their well-being was when parents acknowledged and appreciated their efforts.

I think I looked after myself, I looked after my kids, and I tried to provide a lot for my students and parents in terms of looking after their well-being. What was really helpful was being connected online to a lot of different networks like I'm part of lots of different teacher networks well-being networks. So being able to access that kind of information and share it was really good. (School A, Teacher 1)

Because our parents actually saw what we were doing and I've had parents say, "I don't know how you do it. You know, I couldn't even get two to work properly---- take my hat off to you," and those sorts of comments. (School E, Teacher 9)

Student resilience and growth through challenging times

Teachers commonly mentioned student resilience through different phases of the pandemic. Students were reported to show a remarkable capacity to adapt to change, function positively despite facing a new reality and associated difficulties and focus on positive experiences over negative ones.

When they came back, we did a hand project with everything that was important to them and the memories from COVID-19. And it was really cool to see how kids remembered that. It wasn't about being stuck and not being able to see anyone. It was about, "I did this, and we did this." And, you know, "This is important to me." ... Yeah, the resilience levels were high. Very high. (School C, Teacher 6)

Overall, teachers felt their students fared quite well, despite COVID-19 and the required changes to daily life. Well-being was described as relatively good, overall. However, teachers acknowledged the wide range of student experiences and circumstances, with some students facing more difficulties than others. Despite adversities, some of the children were reported to return to school relatively buoyant:

Even if their circumstances were quite dire or rough - because a lot of our students' parents lost jobs and everything as well - they still seemed to keep quite upbeat. (School A, Teacher 2)

In addition to coping with the challenges faced, teachers observed personal growth in some students. For example, better time management and responsibility for their learning, less reliance on caregivers doing things for them, improved goal setting for hauora and schoolwork. Students were also thought to become more aware and respectful of others in the bid to keep others safe when they returned to school.

As mentioned in the Stepping Up theme, teachers were aware that some students experienced the multi-faceted nature of adversity (e.g., family turmoil and conflict, financial hardship, crowded homes, loss of parents' jobs, death of relatives overseas from COVID-19), and this was reported to affect some students' capacity for resilience and well-being. As discussed, additional support beyond what was being given by teachers and whānau was required to assist with their well-being. Some frustration was shared about insufficient support services and/or access for these children.

I mean I've put in applications for heaps of kids to get counselling but, you know, maybe one out of five will get something. That's not good enough for kids that have gone through something major in their lives, because that's going to affect them not only now, but in the future and if we're not dealing with it now, and that's going to have major repercussions down the line. (School A, Teacher 1)

In summary, teachers observed student resilience and growth through the first national lockdown and return to school, despite the threat of COVID-19 and the sharp shifts in usual routine and learning. However, teachers also reported concern about students and whānau experiencing intense adversity without necessary resources and services. As described earlier, teachers often expanded their role to support these students' well-being as much as was possible.

Systemic support for student well-being

Initial support to ease pressure

Through the interviews, it was apparent that directives from leadership to prioritise teacher, whānau, and student well-being by making the teaching day manageable and easing expectations of learners was crucial to well-being when the country first went into lockdown. During lockdown, students were not expected to engage the entire day in learning, and they were not required to achieve as much as they ordinarily would. Greater recognition was given to informal learning occurring at home with whānau. This flexibility meant students and parents were not stressed out and children returned to school seemingly well.

And they came back [to school] like nothing was different. Right now, I think that was because we didn't impose to stricter guidelines of what needed to be handed in and what learning needed to be done this year. We didn't want to stress them out, we didn't want to stress their parents out. And I think that was actually more beneficial, because when they came back to school, they immediately started learning. So, I would say their well-being was fine. I didn't notice any effects at all. (School B, Teacher 3)

When caregivers were struggling to support the learning of their child, teachers supported parents and reminded them about the informal ways that children learned.

Yeah, so yeah and then we'd have parents going, 'Oh it's not working,' I'm like 'Can I ring you? Can I see what you're doing?' But we didn't want to also stress people out. So, we'd say, 'look, hey I can drop you a hard pack, you don't need to worry, do what you can. Go for a walk and you talk about the birds in the trees, and the sky,' you know. (School G, Teacher 13)

Easing the pressure of teaching and learning meant that teachers, students, and families were given more space and time for well-being during lockdown. They were able to slow down and have time to nurture their health and well-being.

Again, I think they were pretty good. Because of those expectations, you know, not having full days and expecting so much of them. They also had time for themselves. It was shortened hours, and yeah, they were pretty good. And like yeah, I saw improvements in all of them which was fantastic. (School C, Teacher 6)

Yeah, I think my well-being was actually great. To begin with I think I was a little bit stressed. It was really weird like, what, what is this thing? ... It was weird, but after that, I think it was great. Like we were well set up and the students were well set up and I mean there was the unknown, but again, I think having those realistic expectations we weren't doing the long days like we had some time for ourselves as well. (School C, Teacher 5)

Notably, teachers spoke how principals played an important role in setting expectations, and hence in supporting the well-being of teachers, students, and whānau.

So [the principal] was like look, try, and get engagement from as many kids as you can, but our aim is to, even if we contact them to say hey how's it going? We're not expecting them to engage. Like some schools wanted kids to do lessons online, and you know we had like three zooms a week, class zooms. And we had our morning hui with as many people as we could. And I would then contact kids, like phone or text or whatever. Um, but [the principal] was like, 'Do what you have to do, and same for the families. Like we don't want to overload them and make them to stressed.' The [principal's] like that, she's really supportive. (School F, Teacher 10)

We were having lots of discussions about, how are you reaching kids and I haven't heard from such and such. And we had a zoom with the staff, and [the principal] was really good because she was going, you can't control what you can't control. You need to make sure that you're feeling okay, you know, she was worried about our well-being, but she was also saying, well-being of the kids and the whanau needs to be a top priority. (School B, Teacher 4)

As described in the theme about teachers stepping up, the change of expectations around student learning did not mean a lessening of their commitment to teaching and students. Teachers stepped up to provide engaging and creative learning experiences at a distance, did their best to get resources to families facing hardship and inequity, fostered social connection with students, and offered support and care to their communities. However, overall, easing expectations around student learning and prioritising their well-being had some noticeable advantages for teachers, whānau, and students.

Re-settling

On the return to school, teachers clearly made a conscious decision to support children's well-being by easing students back following their extended period at home after the first lockdown. Settling students back in and supporting their well-being was consciously prioritised before moving into curriculum specific learning activities. One teacher said she initially "threw the curriculum out the window." Instead, to support children's transition back to school, some teachers organised fun activities and art, celebrated being back together again, and reassured students that they were going to be okay. Teachers spoke of recentring and calming students by offering fun, easy, and light activities and tasks.

When we came back to school we kind of eased back into it, so we had a couple of weeks being focused on, being healthy... And there wasn't really an expectation that we would jump straight back into reading, writing, maths programmes again. And we talked from a school perspective about re-setting. That was like a big theme, reset, hit the reset button. (School F, Teacher 11)

We realised that going back into regular routines on day one was a ridiculous concept... So, we did fun well-being stuff. We did lots of art... From the moment they came back the concept was, we're here, we're gonna get through this together, and we're gonna have fun so we really wanted to celebrate being back together and reassure them that it's okay, because a lot of them were really, really nervous coming back there was lots of tears, there was lots of uncertainty, lots of kids that weren't sure if they were going to be okay... We're just going to take it nice and easy and nice and calm and we're just going to try to find our centre again before we move on to literacy and math and the rest of it, because it just wasn't important. You can't teach kids when they're stressed out and anxious and when they're worried about what's going to happen next. There's no point. (School A, Teacher 1)

Several teachers spoke of needing to set routines and behavioural expectations again, just like they would do at the beginning of the year. Rebuilding teacher-student and student-student relationships was also considered important.

I had to take a soft approach with that like I would at the beginning of the year, when I'm teaching my new class, the routines of the classroom. Okay, so I didn't expect the moment they walked in the door, right we are back at school, right, because I think that would have been too difficult for them.... And I put a lot of emotional and building relationships... taking the time to listen to them because it was something that they needed to get off their chest. (School B, Teacher 3)

Teachers again pointed to the importance of system-wide support for easing students back into life at school. Generally, principals were thought to support this.

Strategies to support student well-being

As reported above, student well-being was not spontaneous. It was enabled by schools and teachers stepping up and prioritising their well-being.

Our kids came back without too many issues. But that's not a positive effect of the lockdown, it's more how we dealt with it during the lockdown, and how we approached it when they came back. (School B, Teacher 3)

Teachers used several key strategies to support well-being: reassuring students of their safety, integrating well-being into everyday teaching; and fostering teacher-student relationships and a culture of care.

Reassuring students about safety

Aware that whānau and students were anxious about returning to school, teachers reassured students that they were safe at school and together they would make it through and be well:

The anxiety leading up to it, there was quite a bit, I mean a lot of parents wouldn't send their kids to school for a number of weeks after we came back, and I don't blame them. But it's, it's trying to reassure kids and being like, we're actually safe here, we're going to be okay we're going to deal with this together. Yeah, yeah, there was a lot of anxiety. (School A, Teacher 1)

As schools were engaging in practices to increase safety (e.g., handwashing), an effort was made to explain the rationale for this in simple, reassuring ways.

You still had children that still isolated and pulled back from any interactions... So, we had to educate them on you the virus, how it works and how it is spreads, and that it's okay now that we're all back on and mixing and mingling. But we need to be aware of our own hauora and if we get sick, stay home. It's about taking care of yourself like health wise. (School A, Teacher 2)

I had quite a few anxious kids... feeling like 'oh this is a really like dangerous situation to be in.' So talked about, 'We will all sit at the same desk all the time,' because then it makes it very comfy, and they know that there's that desk and their germs only. (School F, Teacher 10)

One way that teachers reassured students was through the provision of appropriate, accurate information about COVID-19; information that was calming instead of alarming. This was particularly important because misinformation and heightened awareness about some of the devastating global effects of COVID-19 were contributing to anxiety of some students. The following teacher shares in some detail how she addressed this:

So, there was a lot of fear... They had started watching the news with their parents and being more aware of things. Every little, tiny thing in the news would come up, for me as a teacher I needed to address that. Because I'm teaching their prefrontal cortex, and as soon as you have fear, that shuts down, and so I can't teach, and I want them to learn because they've had six weeks without me ... When they came in and were like, 'Such and such amount of people are dead.' Okay, I would put it on the screen, the New Zealand government site... and we would look at the people who survived after getting coronavirus, because that was never recorded in the news. And they would go, 'Oh, if you get Coronavirus you can live?' They thought they all died... And you could see them visibly relax... And we would look at like a world map of the hotspots. Is there any in New Zealand? And we were like no. And then, if there was like a level three in Auckland because that happened quite

a bit and that was a big thing. And so, they would go, 'How far away is Auckland?' 'If you're driving in the car it would be 10 hours'... And again, you could see them visibly relax, the tension just went... And eventually, they would come into class, and they go, 'It's in such and such, but we don't need to worry about that.' They're thinking now... It balanced it out and for them they went [sighs]. (School E, Teacher 8)

Focusing on more balanced information was thought to reduce fear and help students feel safe and secure. However, out of respect, teachers said that they were careful to acknowledge that a student's family may have a different view. They also suggested that the age of students was considered in the provision of information. Young students generally had less awareness about COVID-19, and it was thought that this naivety was best retained. Some teachers reduced the focus on COVID-19 to protect students; *"hushed any conversations that came up"* with younger children, and "blocked" some social media discussions with older students.

Getting students back into a normal routine was considered important and reassured students that overall, everything was okay.

Doing those normal things and having fun like getting back into sports and all of that was really helpful. And again, I think some schools probably approached that differently. But it like, they are all out in the playground so why shouldn't we be able to do our sport. It was good being able to do that because I think that fun and exercise is important for them (School C, Teacher 5)

In sum, teachers helped students build resilience by reassuring students that they were safe at school. They shared reassuring, age-appropriate information about COVID-19, reduced the focus on COVID-19, and provided students with familiar routines and activities.

Integrating well-being into everyday teaching

The pandemic experience increased teacher awareness about the importance of teaching student well-being in the classroom or reinforced their commitment to it.

I've been on a kind of a journey of well-being already, so leading up to COVID-19 I spent like two years doing teaching well-being and mindfulness in my classroom.... Going through this experience has put it into light for me how important it actually is and how important it is that we practice it, we model it, and we teach it, you know, explicitly on a regular basis - what mindfulness is, what resilience looks like, how do we build resilience... To be effective educators and prep those kids for the future, we actually need to explicitly teach it, have it as something that we work on in our classroom and the kids understand... So, I think going through this process, it has almost reinforced for me what I was doing and like to take it to a new level and actually really make it something that is not only visible every day in my classroom, but it's something that the kids understand and do as much as I do. (School A, Teacher 1)

Teachers engaged in a range of activities with their students: increasing students' self-awareness and acknowledgment of their feelings, encouraging a positive mindset, strengthening self-worth and self-compassion through affirmations, and through goal setting.

I'm just going to bring it back to their whole self-awareness, it's what we're promoting more of... How are you really feeling you know? So, getting them to be self-aware, not just 'Yeah I'm good,' and really, you're not. So, in touch with your feelings. (School A, Teacher 2)

Definitely, so we were doing far more positive self-affirmations right, concentrating on them a lot more now. If you are good at something, say it and keep on repeating it until you are that one... Getting them to love themselves again. They have to be accepting of themselves first before they can give to others. And we do that within our whole mixed learning environment, within Poutama, it's positive affirmations... Also our goal setting. They're working on things a lot harder now for their own personal goals, it is quite nice to see. It's based around their hauora, so their well-being, and also around schoolwork as well. (School A, Teacher 2)

In summary, teachers fostered resilience by increasing the emphasis on teaching well-being strategies in the classroom.

Fostering relationships and a culture of care

Teachers also spoke of fostering a caring environment for students where student well-being was supported by peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, and pastoral care.

We're in a profession of caring and, you know, building relationships... You see these kids every day, you love them like they're your own and when you're, you know they're suffering, it's hard.... And you think after 20 years, like harden up, but you can't, you never will because your heart is in your work. Kids' well-being definitely affects yours, and when I know there's lots of stuff going for my kids, I'm like, 'What do I do?' (School A, Teacher 1)

Our school in our classroom, we are more like a whole whānau, that is how we operate. It's about everyone looking out for everyone else as well. Someone's always there for you whether it's just talk to or whether it's just to sit down and be quiet with. There's always someone there for you. Yeah, we are whānau and we look out for each other. (School A, Teacher 2)

Teacher-student relationships were considered paramount.

Everything is interconnected. And in order for everything to be fulfilled, you need all aspects working. Like relationships, everything stems off that, then you have the time, and the mindset. [COVID-19] just highlighted the reason why that's key, and why that is a massive part of the job that we do. That's literally the foundation of everything. (School C, Teacher 6)

It comes back to our relationship building as teachers. If you've got a good relationship with your students, you understand them and you know them individually. I think that is so important... I'm in an environment where that happens (School E, Teacher 9)

In summary, teacher interviews suggested that student well-being was fostered through the efforts teachers made in developing a culture of care, strong teacher-student relationships, and supportive peer relationships.

Summary

In conclusion, teachers and students demonstrated considerable resilience during the first national lockdown, in returning to school, and as community outbreaks occurred in various parts of the country. A key resilience-enabling factor was system-wide support for easing pressure and increasing flexibility for student learning so that well-being could be prioritised. In addition to this, teachers stepped up and engaged in a range of strategies that nurtured their holistic well-being: exercise, engaging in fun and meaningful leisure activities, self-awareness, identifying what they could control, and connection with others. Student resilience was strengthened in part by how teachers supported student well-being: reassurance of their safety, integration of well-being into everyday teaching, and by fostering teacher-student relationships and a culture of care. Even though resilience was shown by teachers and students alike, the circumstances of some teachers and students made the pandemic particularly hard. Better resourcing and access to supports seem paramount for students in need, and greater attention to teacher well-being is required.

Reflecting and recalibrating

The 2020 lockdown was a time of uncertainty for many in New Zealand as the country grappled with what a 4-week lockdown meant for households, whānau and businesses, for schools and participating teachers digital teaching went on for 6 weeks. One of the most significant shifts for teachers and schools was the pivot to online learning. Teaching staff were required to shift their classroom online and reach into the homes of children to teach remotely. Teachers reflected on the experience of teaching remotely and reflected on the learning they took from such experiences. Teachers considered new opportunities and ways to do things differently when returning to the classroom. These reflections supported teachers to re-prioritise, re-focus and re-consider some taken for granted assumptions about what it means to be a teacher.

Demands of the profession

Teachers identified several pressures that were exacerbated due to lockdown. For some teachers, the pressure to have children academically “ready” for the next year, or to be prepared for a future lockdown featured foremost within their experiences of lockdown. Teachers reported noticing an impact of the academic performance of students and held the responsibility for them to “catch up.”

Some of the concepts we explored during COVID-19 last year, our assessment data has dropped according to those particular areas. I wouldn't say dropped, but like, there's a lot more work needed in those areas. (School C, Teacher 6)

Although some teachers noted the loss of academic gains during lockdown, others felt that the digital classroom had benefits for their learners. As the following teacher illustrated, the lack of distractions in the classroom meant that the learning was more focused in a digital space.

You can do all of the schoolwork in a shortened, like the core lesson, in a short amount of time. (School E, Teacher 8)

For others, the online teaching structure enabled them to spend more time with new whānau members in a way the traditional classroom would not have.

It was quite you know cool with on Zoom calls and stuff you know just sitting there holding a baby. Quite tired, but then also relieved I wasn't teaching tired. Having to be online for a couple of hours is a lot different from being at school for eight or nine hours in front of a class for you know four and half hours of the day. (School F, Teacher 11)

Teachers were able to structure their day in a way that suited their needs according to their circumstances. This enabled teachers to accommodate their own personal circumstances, and fit work around the support they needed to provide to their whānau, or themselves. For example, one teacher that was grieving due to the loss of a close whānau member spoke about the structure of their day as being supportive to allowing them to get back to work without increased pressure

Yeah, so that was really good. I loved it because I could put on a facade for the morning, you know or whatever. At that stage I was only teaching mornings, and so I could be in bed or whatever and I could just teach from there. (School E, Teacher 9)

These novel experiences at times prompted teachers to reflect on the commitments of the teaching profession. These were not always related to COVID-19 but were a wider reflection on the demands of the profession. At times, teachers felt unsupported while managing these pressures.

I think from all. I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves right. I think management has a lot of expectations; I think ministry has a lot of expectations. I do feel like there is a lot of pressure in the teaching profession, certainly. (School B, Teacher 4)

These reflections on the difficulty and demands of the role prompted some teachers to reflect on how much of themselves they give the profession, and as one participant illustrates, they considered the pressure to do better, and the potential costs of achieving this.

I think I'm a good teacher, but you can always do better but, you want to see what that would look like and how it works. I suppose that was pre lockdown, it was just a good reflection time. I definitely think people with families, they work so hard. But I don't know, I'm not in that situation. But I also know that I wouldn't, want to pay those costs. (School F, Teacher 10)

When reflecting on the profession, teachers examined the history and purpose of education, and provided insightful comment into the impact of technology and different ways of doing and being. As one teacher highlighted, the impact of the 'mindset' of teaching impacted the way their job was done.

That mindset of teaching, I don't know where its coming from just historically kids still need to know that, whereas I don't think they do. These kids are growing up in a different time than what we are teaching them for. (School F, Teacher 11)

For some, 2020 lockdown brought them more time to get through additional tasks they had always wanted to complete but could not balance with the demands of the classroom. The increased time during COVID-19 provided space to address some of the other aspects of their role.

It was always what I'd asked for. It was what I always thought, I thought if I just had more time... And then I could do it and I proved myself right. (School E, Teacher 9)

Teachers were aware that some students would have regressed academically that could put them under some pressure when students returned to school, but their commitment and passion to their teaching was evident in the joy they had in reconnecting with students.

It always lifts you. Having them back and seeing their faces; having those little catch up checks with everyone all the time you know. Just touching base with them, because a lot of them come in with their own worries, you can see them. And so, for them just have you know to be able to sit down and have a chat it's a huge thing. (School A, Teacher 1)


Re-imagining the role

The demands of teaching during COVID-19 meant that teachers reflected on the way they structured their pedagogy and priorities for teaching, causing them to re-imagine and re-conceptualise the way their time could be spent. Teachers examined aspects such as structure of lessons, to changing priorities and ways of teaching. For some teachers this was a positive experience that increased their confidence in the classroom, while other teachers reported enjoying the different ways of structuring lessons. But they were frustrated upon the return to school as their role shifted quickly back to traditional organisational demands.

It was kind of like hang on, that flipped really quickly from the let's explore, we have the potential, the theme was we can reset what learning looks like and we reset it to exactly what it looked like before. With this little blip in the middle where there was this glimpse of hope. For me, because I'm trying to figure out how to teach outside of the box, I guess. So, lockdown was a good opportunity to sort of explore and experiment with that, and there were maybe a couple of things in the school that we kept, but it quickly got shuffled under the rug and settled back into routine because you know, the board or the ministry needs data. (School F, Teacher 11)

While lockdown enabled teachers to re-imagine a different way of being, the return to school meant an adjustment to a new "normal." Teachers spoke about aspects of their practice that changed due to lockdown, such as an increased focus on well-being, and creativity in the classroom. The ways in which teachers reflected on their prioritisation of time, minimised some of their additional commitments when they returned to school. As one teacher illustrates, the consideration of workload and demands on teaching staff supported them to re-consider specific commitments such as the purpose of meetings.

I think it made me think more about workload after that. And how often we meet up, what's expected of us and just question some of it a little bit, especially when it comes to meetings. Whereas over lockdown we were able to cover things in a quick zoom or an email whereas I feel like the meetings have really stepped up and lots could be shorter or aren't necessary. (School F, Teacher 12)



For other teachers, the reflection during lockdown 2020 meant they were better able to focus on themselves, by giving themselves more ‘Me time’ as noted earlier. These insights led to increased self-awareness among teachers. As one teacher noted, COVID-19 had made staff and students more aware of being unwell, and the impact of this. This had resulted in her taking sick days when these were warranted, rather than just “pushing through.”

Just when I’m sick, I should take time off to make sure that I don’t get worse and find out because I wouldn’t I’ve told my kids before and I didn’t come to I’m not coming to school unless I am dying. Like, I’ve got a sore throat I’m here. I guess you don’t need to, if I’m sick I need to make sure I take those times off rather than just being like, no, got to push through. It could turn into something. (School D, Teacher 7)

Summary

Shifting to online teaching changed the context in which teachers connected with learners. The four walled classroom was shifted to a digital space of learning, and the 9-3pm structure was up for negotiation. Teachers spoke about the navigation of the digital classroom in terms of learning delivery and structure of their day. There were both benefits and challenges associated with this shift of context which had positive and negative impacts on teacher well-being. The ability to structure learning and teaching in a short burst enabled more flexibility in teachers’ daily timetable. This enabled them to spend more time with their whānau or doing activities they saw as important and supportive to their well-being. As one teacher outlined, COVID-19 enabled the focus of their attention to shift from being solely on students to their own family time.

It kind of became a routine where I would find my times to do the work bit of planning or looking at what the kids were doing, marking their work and Zoom calls with the team to sort of plan the next few days, weeks activities whatever that was and then the rest of it was just family time so my brain was, yeah, kind of more focused on family than on the teaching, online learning sort of stuff but it was actually a really awesome opportunity to do that. (School F, Teacher 2)

Lockdown was a time of reflection, self-awareness, and re-focus for teachers, with an increased focus on the well-being of students and themselves and an excitement about the possibilities to do things differently within the classroom. While the return to classrooms was a welcome opportunity to reconnect with children, the demands of the system such as testing, meetings, and extracurricular planning quickly re-entered teachers lives. This was frustrating for teachers when they felt they had a missed opportunity to continue with the creativity that COVID-19 lockdown afforded. The pressures of the system to focus on academic achievement, and the need to have children get up to speed was felt and mentioned by some teachers. This pressure is not entirely unwarranted given the early research on the negative impact of COVID-19 on student academic achievement (Drane, Vernon & O’Shea, 2020), and the hypothesis that evidence of summer learning loss would mean a similar impact while missing school (Kuhdeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Teachers created opportunities to structure different way of organising teaching throughout lockdown in ways that gave them some semblance of work-life balance and supported their well-being. COVID-19 had highlighted the importance of work-life balance for these teachers, and they endeavoured to continue to maintain it when they returned to the classroom.

What the students told us

Students in each focus group were asked about their understanding of well-being and their responses were very perceptive. When asked about well-being, students across all focus groups shared words such as *being happy, safe, physically healthy, mentally healthy, and connected*. Well-being was about 'having fun,' 'being cheerful,' 'feeling good in yourself' (School B, Year 4), and 'doing things you like' (School E, Year 4). It also included feeling 'energetic' (School C, Year 4) and 'enthusiastic' (School B, Year 7-8) yet 'calm' (School B, Year 4). It related to 'having friends' (School B, Year 4), 'family' (School A, Year 4; School E, Year 4), and 'pets' (School B, Year 4). Students in School C and E specifically mentioned physical health as part of well-being, which included eating a 'balanced diet,' staying fit 'not being sick' (School C, Year 4; School C, Year 7-8; School E, Year 4), and 'keeping safe from the virus' (Student School, C, Year 7-8). 'Sunshine' was mentioned as part of well-being by Year 4 students in one of the schools (School E, Year 6-7). There was an element of self-care and being cared for by others in the way they talked about well-being: 'take care of yourself,' "how you treat yourself," "not allowing 'people to bring you down' (School B, Year 7-8); also 'being looked after', and 'having people care about you' (Students, School C, Year 7-8). Across the focus groups, students seemed to naturally conceptualise well-being as holistic.

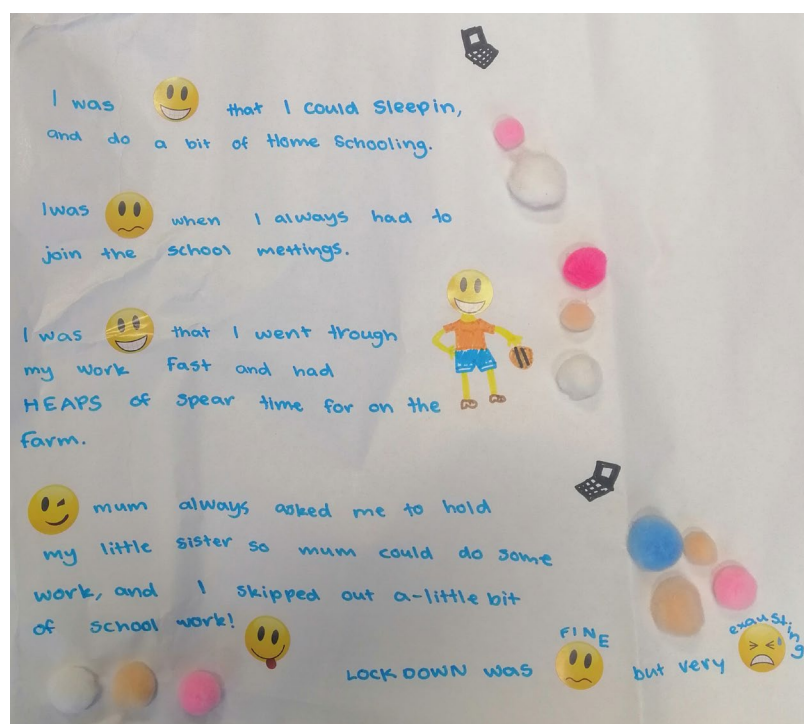
Students were subsequently asked to talk about their sense of well-being at three different phases: during the first national lockdown (two months starting 26 March 2020), at the time of returning to school (mid-May 2020), and at the time of the focus group (March 2021 to August 2021). Student responses are reported under the three phases. Following this, key themes are presented about student well-being over these three phases of COVID-19 in New Zealand.

During lockdown

Mixed feelings

Students shared mixed feelings about lockdown. They felt shocked, confused, worried, scared, safe, happy, bored, and sad. As an example, one student wrote, 'at home it was fun and I was bored' (School A, Year 4). Another wrote the following poem with stickers to show the range of feelings that she had during lockdown.

Poem by a Year 6/7 student (School E)



Adjusting to the lockdown

Students initially reported feeling 'shocked' because of the suddenness of the lockdown. Some were 'confused,' 'freaking out,' and 'worried;' worried because "you don't know what is happening" and "you feel locked away" (Student School B, Year 7-8). Some were 'scared of coronavirus' (School B, Year 7-8) as it meant 'danger' (School C, Year 5-6). Students in focus groups also talked about feeling 'sad' and 'unhappy' that many people were dying across the world: "Because there were people that died" (School A, Year 4). For students with close family members in countries badly affected by COVID-19, this was particularly worrying. For example, one student was worried that her mother might catch COVID-19, as she was living in a country with high number of cases and deaths (School C, Year 5-6). Despite some worry about coronavirus, students understood that the New Zealand lockdown was 'keeping you safe from the virus' and 'stopping the spread of bugs' (School C, Year 4; School C, Year 5-6; School E, Year 4; School E, Year 6-7).

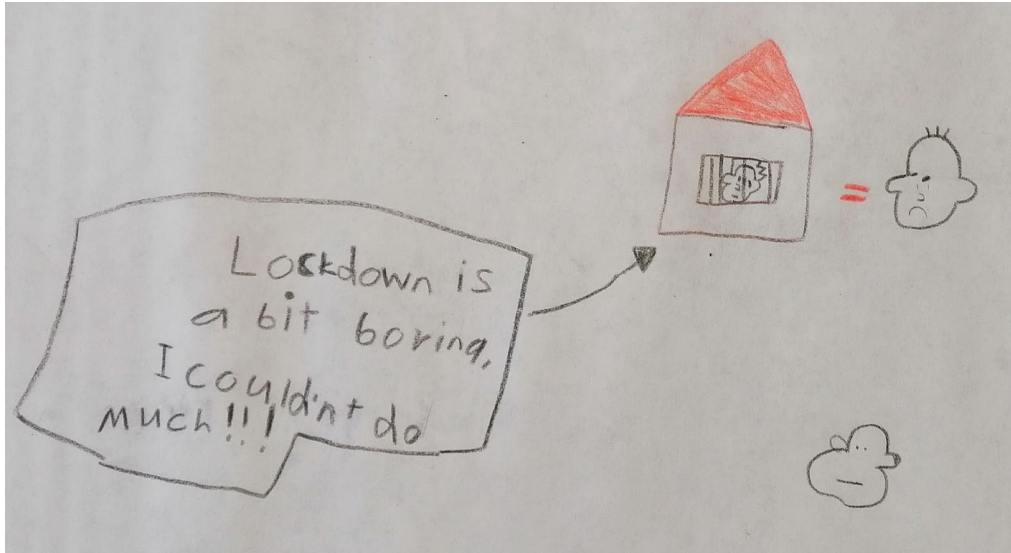
Picture by Year 7/8 student (School A)



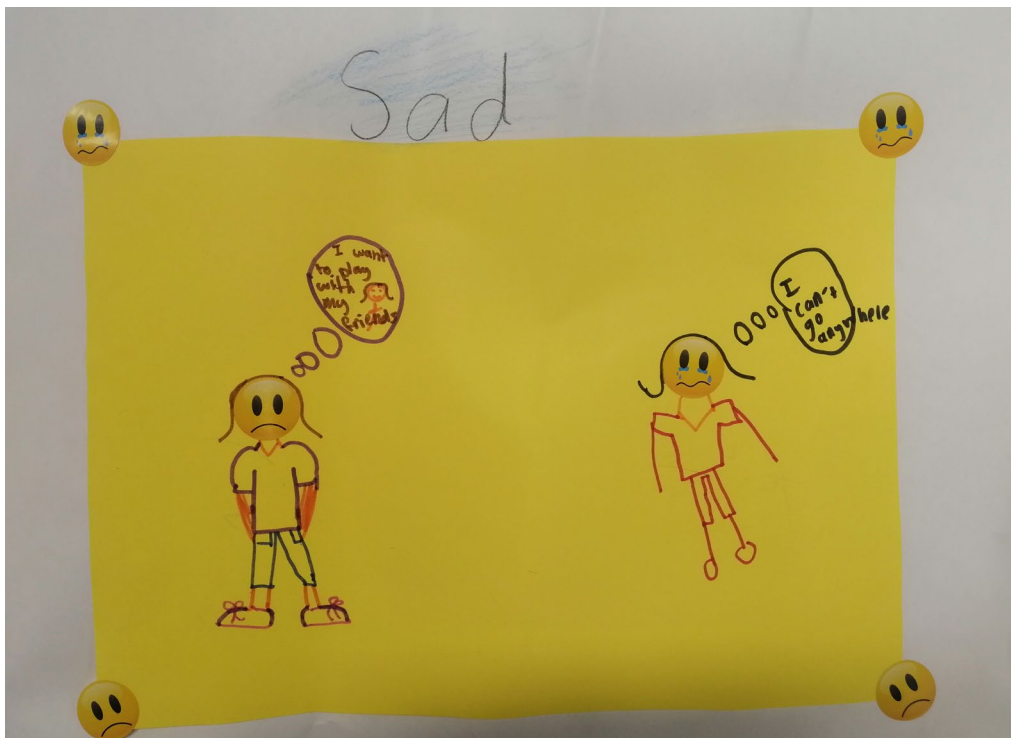
Restrictions on freedom to go places and see friends

While students generally felt safe at home, they frequently mentioned the restrictive nature of lockdown. Spatially, they were (mostly) confined to their home and unable to go to their favourite places, and relationally, they were unable to interact or do things that they enjoyed with friends and family members outside their bubble. They 'couldn't go out,' 'couldn't see friends and families,' and 'were not able to visit others in their bubbles' (School A, Year 4). Students used words like 'locked in,' 'locked away,' and 'feeling confined.' To express the restrictive nature of the lockdown, one student drew a picture of a prison with bars: "Prison bars so you can't get out;" "it was 'a bit boring, I couldn't do much' (School A, Year 4). Other students also mentioned getting bored – or feeling annoyed, angry, unhappy, or lonely - 'because I couldn't do what I wanted to do' (School A, Year 4), 'couldn't go outside' (School B, Year 4) or 'couldn't visit the beach' (School A, Year 4). As one student said, 'you can't even go out to the shops and get lollies' (School B, Year 7-8). Sadness was also expressed by some about sports being cancelled (School C, Year 5-6). Despite the restrictions and rules, some students felt less confined as they got 'fresh air,' 'ran around' in the backyard (School C, Year 5-6) or went for walks (School E, Year 4) with their dog (School B, Year 4).

Picture by Year 4 student (School A)



Artwork by Year 4 student (School E)



Not being able to see their friends was mentioned across all the focus groups and ages. It was like a “nightmare” not being able to see your friends (School C, Year 7-8). “You can’t see your friends and have play dates” (School C, Year 4). Nor could they have sleep overs (School B, Year 4; School C, Year 4). Students also felt ‘extra sad not being able to see some people in the family’ (School B, Year 4), including parents and relatives who lived nearby, in other regions of the country or overseas. A few were worried about not being able to see their grandparents. At the same time, they realised that the restrictions served an important role in keeping them safe. For example, one student became worried when her family bubble was broken by the visit of a family member from outside her bubble (School A, Year 7-8). Having more people to talk to while they were restricted to their homes was mentioned by some students. While some students did not have their friends’ contact details (School C, Year 5-6), some stayed connected by phoning them or using social

media (School A, Year 5-6; School E, Year 6-7). This is shown in the artwork below, which was created by three students who worked together. Parents also arranged video calls with family members outside their bubbles.

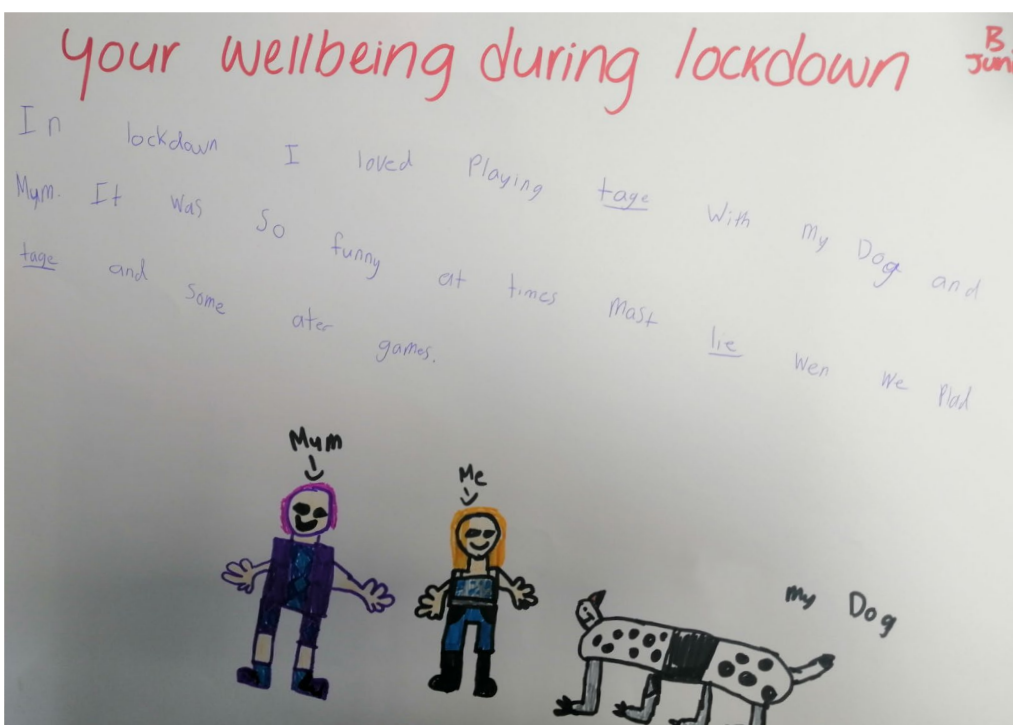
An amalgam of drawings by three Year 6/7 students (School E)



Quality time with family

While students felt sad about not seeing friends and loved ones outside the home, they had the opportunity to have more quality time with family members at home and this contributed to feeling happy. For example, one student enjoyed playing with his little sister and making her laugh (School B, Year 4). Others enjoyed playing games, participating in sports activities, and singing and dancing with siblings and family. Students also expressed happiness about having extra time with parents. It was “fun because I got to make up a lot of jokey things and tell them to my mum and she started laughing like crazy” (Student Year 7-8, School E). As seen in the picture below, one student ‘loved’ playing tag with her Mum and dog, which she described as ‘so funny’ (School B, Year 4). As she and other students mentioned, ordinarily parents were busy, and so the extra time together was special. Animals/pets often featured in students’ positive accounts of the lockdown period. Students loved having more time interacting with pets and spoke fondly of time playing their dogs, riding their horses, and patting their cats. “He’s a Labrador. And I played with him during lockdown” (School A, Year 4). For some, pets met a child’s need for affection and intimacy. One student said this was particularly important as his relationships with those in his family are strained (School A, Years 7-8). Students demonstrated perceptive of how their pets were a key part of feeling happy and less isolated during the lockdown.

Picture by Year 4 student (School B)



Unfortunately, the extra time with family was stressful if there were difficult family dynamics and frequent conflict. One student spoke about many arguments with her brother, which made her mother (and them) angry and sad (School A, Year 7-8). She used colours to represent family members' emotions in her artwork: red for anger and blue for sadness.

Picture by Year 7/8 student (School A)



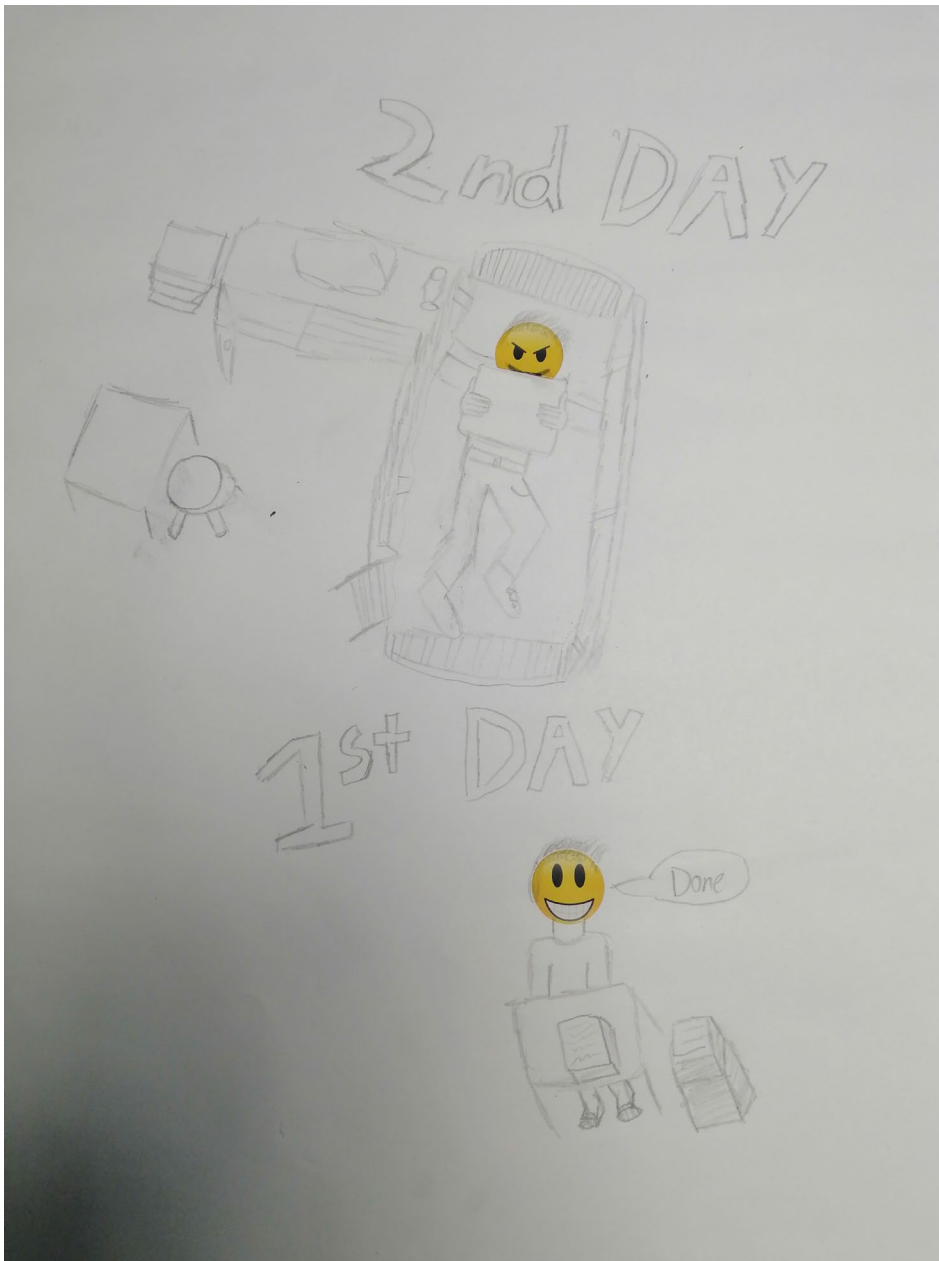
Free time and leisure

In addition to quality time with family members, many students enjoyed the opportunity to have more free time to play and engage in enjoyable activities. Activities included spending 'a lot more time jumping on the trampoline,' practising soccer, exercise, yoga, music, and dancing. Some enjoyed gaming (or watching siblings gaming), screen time, reading books, playing board games, a 'lot of arts and crafts,' and baking and cooking. There was more 'free time to go outside' and it was 'fun going for walks' (School E, Year 4; School E, Year 6-7). Some schools set up non-academic learning activities for students to engage and have some fun. "It was exciting. The library challenge – they did challenges and one of the challenges was a cake" (School C, Year 5-6). Rural and semi-rural children spoke of riding their horses and enjoying more time together on the farm. Alongside the freedom to play, some children were also kept busy by helping their parents on the farm, caring for younger siblings, and doing household chores. "I did help dad on the farm a bit more" said one, while another "had to mow the lawn a bit more" (School E, Year 7-8). While students enjoyed the freedom of having more time to play and relax, eventually many became quite tired of the restrictions of lockdown. "At the beginning of lockdown, it was quite exciting and like different and then at the end you were kind of sick of just being stuck in your own bubble" (School E, Year 4).

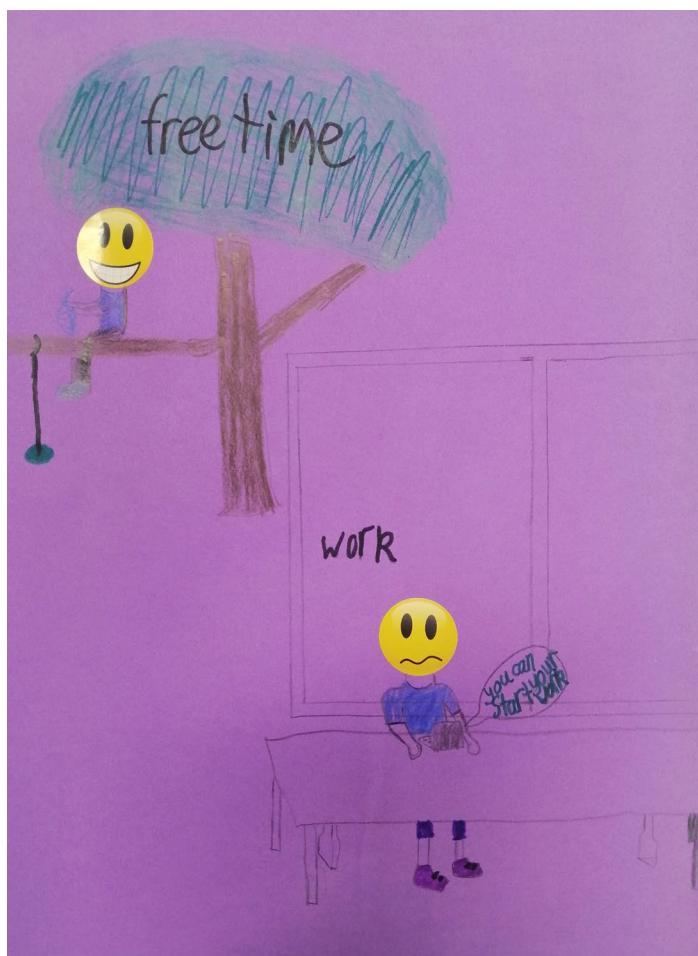
Freedom and autonomy with schoolwork

Having more time for play, family and pets, and the farm was possible because schools allowed students to spend less hours on schoolwork, and this contributed to feeling happy. "It was fun doing schoolwork just from 9 to 12" (School C, Year 4). "It finished quickly" (School E, Year 7-8). Timetabling became more flexible, which meant that students 'felt in control of schoolwork' and learning. They could 'start early and finish early' or 'finish it in a couple of days' and use remaining time in the day and week for other activities (School A, Year 7-8).

Picture by Year 5/6 student (School B)



Artwork by Year 6/7 student (School E)



Students could also sleep in. “I could get up whenever I wanted” (School B, Year 7-8). They did not have to wear a uniform, could eat when they wanted, and could take a break when they felt like it. Some students also liked a more predictable learning environment; where it was ‘quieter,’ and they had more control because students ‘weren’t taking your pencils’ (School C, Year 5-6). Overall, students spoke favourably of fewer school hours, greater autonomy, and the freedom and time to do other activities. Students at one school all said that the lockdown and learning from home was less tiring (School E, Year 7-8).

Challenges of online learning

While some students liked home schooling (School A, Year 7-8), doing schoolwork could be hard as teachers were ‘far away’. It was ‘hard not having teachers to help,’ especially when parents were juggling other responsibilities (School E, Year 6-7). One student said that she “didn’t learn anything online so much because I like my teacher to be face-to-face” (School B, Year 7-8). It was hard for some students to contact teachers when they wanted to: “I didn’t really learn much because my teacher, he wasn’t there like if you had a question, you would like have to type it and send an email but if you were in the classroom, you could just go up to him” (School B, Year 7-8). For some children having their own digital devices such as a laptop would have been helpful, rather than sharing it with other family members.

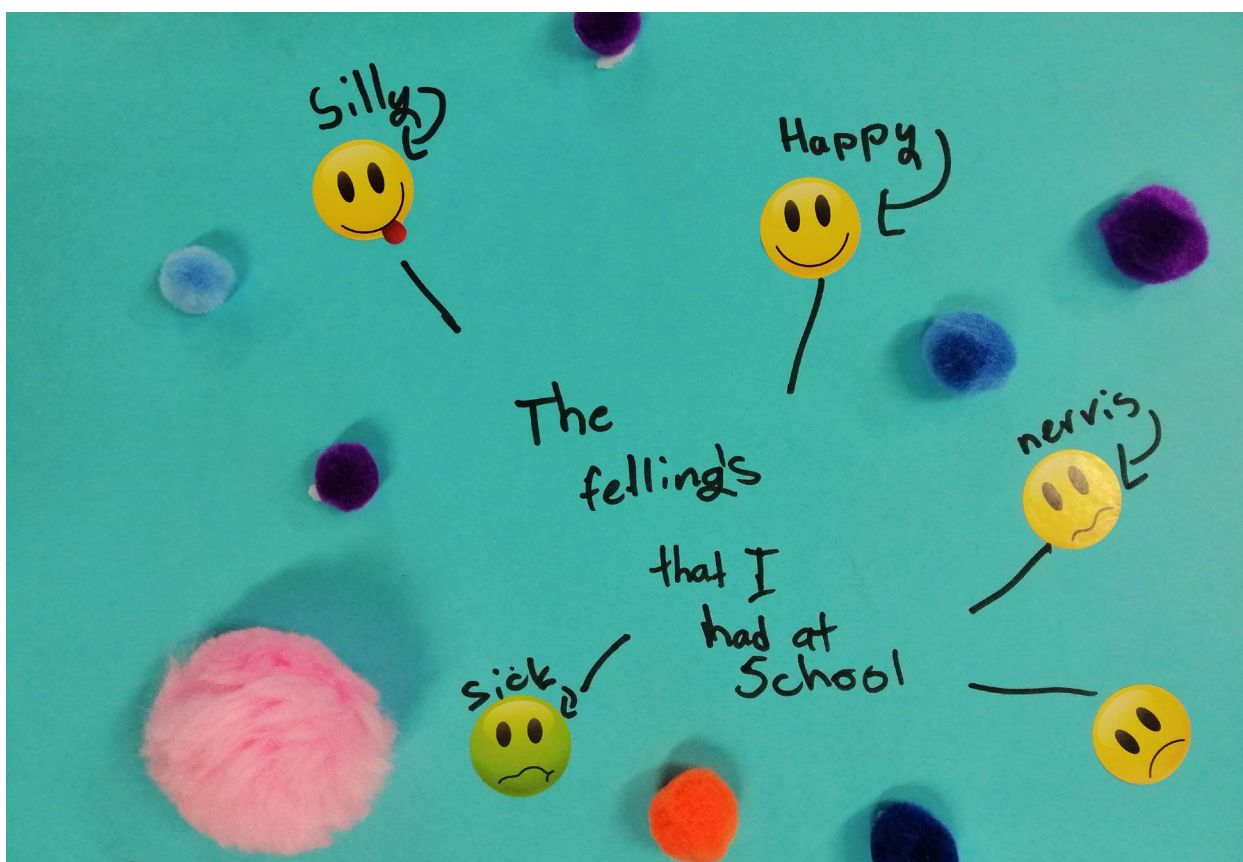
In summary, Year 4 to 8 students in the focus groups experienced mixed feelings over the course of lockdown. Their well-being seemed to be enhanced by knowing their family was safe from the virus, and having autonomy with their schoolwork, freedom to engage in enjoyable activities, and quality time with pets and family members at home. These factors seemed to help balance the fear or COVID-19 and losses associated with being confined to the home and separated from others (including their friends). Schools’ flexibility regarding schoolwork and the family context also seemed to play a role.

At the point of returning to school

Mixed feelings

This phase evoked mixed feelings from students. Mostly, they felt excited, happy, and silly to see their friends again. However, they also felt nervous about catching the virus and adjusting to the school context - and sad and annoyed about leaving behind the advantages of lockdown and facing a new set of rules and restrictions at school. The mixed feelings of a student are shown in the picture below. As this student described, she was happy to return to school but also felt weird and anxious of catching the virus. "Like, you weren't actually sick, but your tummy felt because you did you felt nervous" (School A, Year 4).

Picture by a Year 4 student (School A)

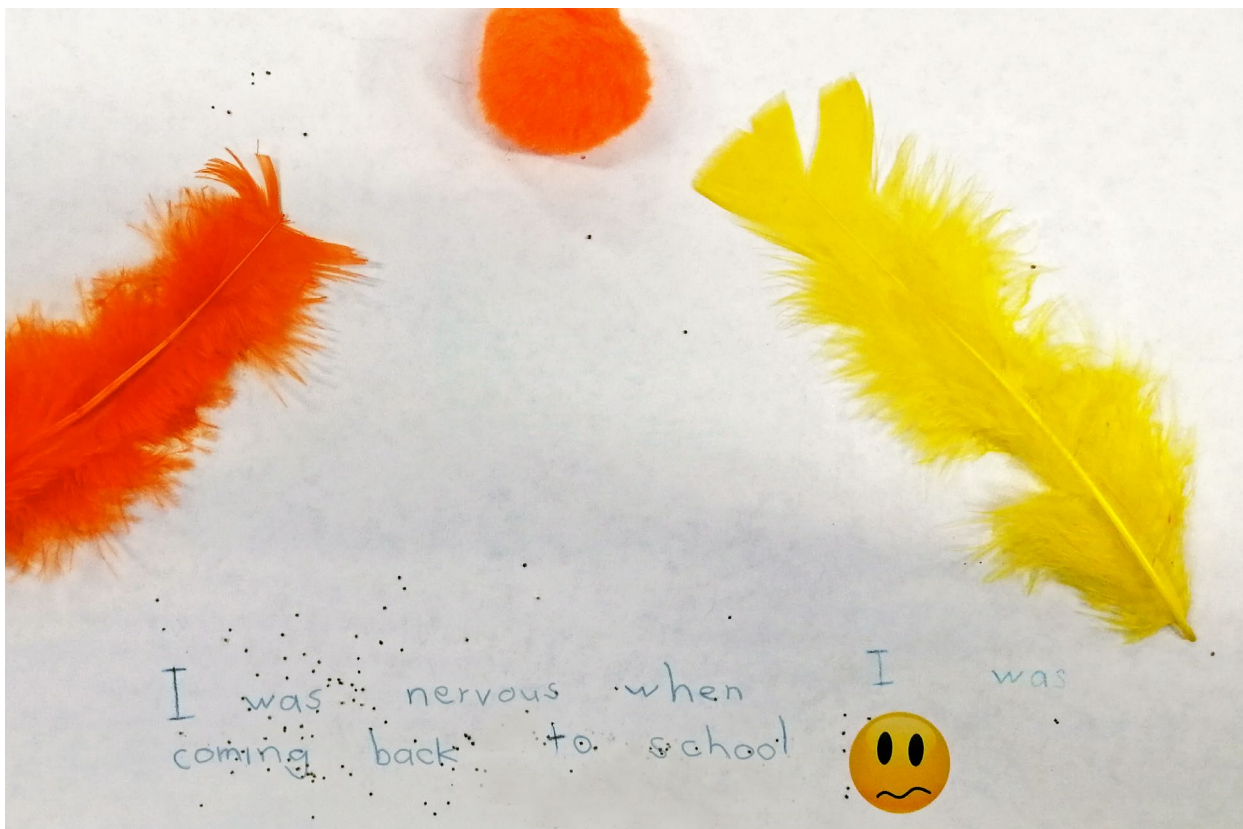


Another student explained his mixed feelings by drawing an eye with DNA, little blood vessels, and patterns inside. "It's an eye filled with excitement, and you know just feeling happy to be at school again and unsure too; unsure because it's the first time in a while" (School D, Year 7-8). As was the case for many other students, he experienced happiness, excitement, and nervousness on returning to school.

Re-adjusting

Returning to school involved a period of adjustment. 'It was different coming back and took time to adjust' (School E, Year 6-7). For some there was nervousness about going back into a new environment after an extended period away. As one student said, it was 'scary' and 'felt like the first day of school' (School C, Year 5-6). While it was often a time of happiness, it was also described as 'terrifying.' This was compounded by the perceived risk of being exposed to coronavirus.

Picture by Year 4 student (School A)



Students also felt that they lost some of the benefits of lockdown. Some 'wanted to stay at home' with family and to 'relax.' They were 'annoyed' or 'sad' at having 'less family time' and less free time to play. As one student said, "It's still annoying because you sort of miss lockdown and the fun things you did and being with family" (School E, Year 7-8). One student felt particularly 'sad,' with perceived losses being compounded by things that he did not like about school (School C, Year 5-6). He was a student who indicated he did not like the loud and busy school environment. "When I went back to school, it felt weird because there were more people around me" (School C, Year 5-6). Another student also wrote "it felt sad, there was no space" (School C, Year 5-6). Other students spoke less about losses and instead focused more on their happiness about moving out of lockdown. For example, one student said she felt "pretty happy lockdown was dead" (School A, Year 7-8). Another student was 'happy to get away from siblings' (School A, Year 7-8). This indicated that the degree of adjustment was variable for students.

The return to school also meant a return of school routines and a structured timetable. Students mentioned this as 'annoying' or 'boring' because they lost much of their free time to play: "It was more boring because when we were at home, we did all our work at once and then we could go and play more, and at school we had to do it like one at a time and didn't get as much play" (School E, Year 7-8). Some students talked about it being difficult to get back into the routine of waking up early and getting ready for school. You had to 'make lunches' (School E, Year 6-7), 'get back into uniform and get up early' (School A, Year 7-8). "Your body clock had to be adjusted" (School E, Year 7-8). However, some 'liked having structure back again' (School A, Year 7-8) and said they needed it because they had 'got lazy' (School B, Year 4).

Mostly, any adjustment to losses (i.e., family time and leisure) was offset by the chance to see and be with their friends. One of the students summed it up by saying:

Well, you had to get a bit more adjusted to it but (yeah) it's back to normal like before the lockdown. Before the lockdown you're like so used to it and then you're in the lockdown and your like, oh yeah I get a sleep in and then you go back and your like back to school again, back to early waking up, but it was still good because you got to see your friends. So, you had a positive and a negative. (School E, Year 7-8)

Happy to see friends and teachers

The opportunity to be back at school and see friends again was commonly mentioned in the focus groups. Students highlighted it “felt good to be back” (School C, Year 5-6) and they were ‘happy to see friends again’ (School A, Year 7-8; School B Year 7-8). Examples of this include students saying that they were ‘glad they could sit with actual friends’ (School C, Year 5-6), ‘it felt good to see friends and catch up about lots of things’ (School B, Year 4), and ‘we could chat’ and ‘we played games’ (School C, Year 4). One student drew a picture of her friend and wrote “support crew” beside it (School A, Year 7-8). Love of school and the happiness of seeing their friends is captured in the artwork seen below. Happiness about seeing teachers again was also sometimes mentioned or represented. For example, ‘it was great to see my friends, to hug them and hug the teacher’ (School C, Year 5-6).

Artwork by Year 4 student (School A)



Picture by Year 5/6 student (School C)



As well as seeing friends at school, some students spoke about the freedom to do enjoyable things with friends outside of school too. For example, one student said that she was “happy because I can like see my friends and I can go places with my horse, and I like I can go to the beach and can like hang out with my friends with my horse” (School B, Year 7-8).

However, being back at school also meant that students saw peers that they ‘were not quite happy to see’ (School B, Year 4). Also, students had to navigate typical relationship issues with friends. As one student wrote:

It was annoying as well because my friends changed from talking about what we liked to talk about, to talking about different things. It was hard because they kept arguing about what they didn't like” (School C, Year 5-6).

Artwork by a Year 5/6 student (School C)

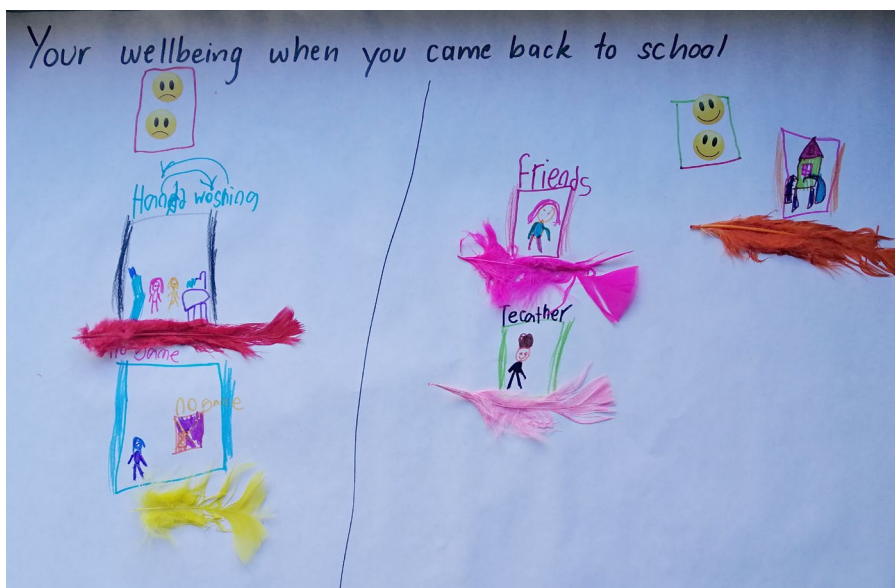


Mostly though, students reported feeling happy to be seen and be with their friends on returning to school.

New rules and regulations for safety

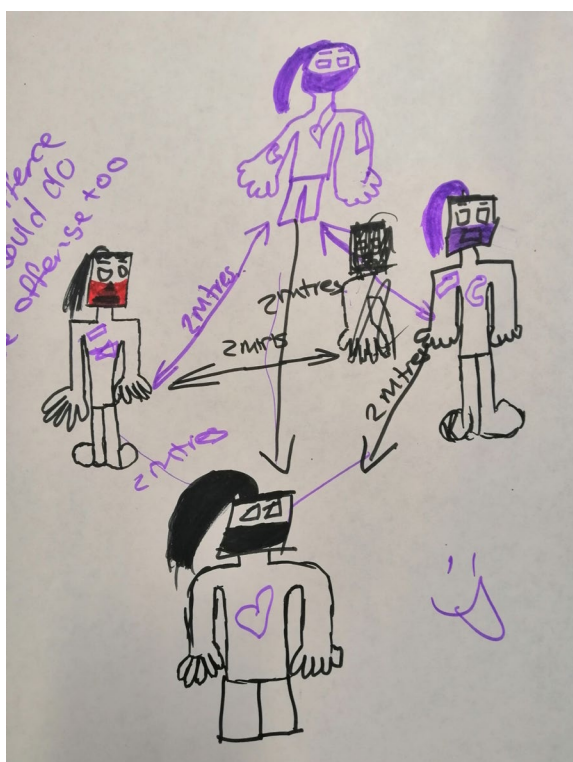
On returning to school many lockdown restrictions disappeared. Students ‘felt free’ to see friends and teachers again (School A, Year 7-8) and they ‘felt better because there was more space’ and they were not ‘so locked in’ (School C, Year 5-6). However, they were now subject to new rules and regulations to promote student and teacher safety during this phase of the pandemic. Some students felt safe that ‘they could wear masks’ and liked that there was someone to talk to if they felt ‘worried’ (School A, Year 3-4). This reflected the level of anxiety around COVID-19 and its effects, which were portrayed graphically across media day after day. However, despite their protective potential, most students ‘did not like frequent handwashing’ (School C, Year 5-6) and they found social distancing ‘hard’, ‘annoying’, and ‘sad’ (School B, Year 7-8; School C, Year 5-6). ‘Having own device and not sharing’ was described as ‘good’ though (School B, Year 4).

Artwork by Year 5/6 student (School C)



The dislike of social distancing was a key discussion point, even though specific requirements varied in schools. Some students remembered 'dots in the classroom' that they had to sit on (School A, Year 4). At one school, 'it was different and complicated because they could not go out for morning tea and lunch' like usual; 'everything was separate' (School B, Year 4). At another school, it was described as 'sad, because you had to maintain social distance, and annoying, it did not feel normal' (School C, Year 5-6). Seeing their friends after a long break meant most students wanted more physical proximity and to be able to give their friends a 'hug' and to talk together. The social distancing requirement curbed this. It meant it was 'hard to connect and talk with friends' (School B, Year). As explained by one student, "You can see your friends and have nice chats and stuff, but you have to shout because they are two meters away" (School C, Year 4). One student drew the picture below.

Picture by Year 7-8 student (School A)



Beside the drawing, she wrote the accompanying comment:

The desks were all spread out and were a mile away... It was annoying because we had to social distance, and I couldn't hug my friends and we had to air hug and we couldn't whisper jokes... Because otherwise we could spread the infectious disease and increase the spread of COVID-19 (not that I knew anyone that had it).

Social distancing requirements in some schools not only impacted how close students could get to their friends but how close they could get to their teacher. It was 'hard because the teachers were far away' (School A, Year 7-8). However, among the students, there were some who liked the notion of distancing: "It was fun;" "we had our own private desk!" (Student, 7-8 School B). One student, who attended a school with no social distancing in the playground, disliked the closeness and affection when they returned to school: "it felt horrible because everyone was hugging and I don't like it" (School C, Year 5-6). Once again, even in a study with a relatively small sample, it was evident that students experienced the impacts of pandemic responses quite differently. While social distancing was disliked by most students, some students enjoyed extra space.

Learning easier

Several students were 'happy' that online learning was over and they 'enjoyed learning back at school' with their teacher and peers in the classroom. One student wrote, "I am happy because I'm out of online school" (School B, Year 7-8). A couple of students mentioned they 'learnt a lot more' by working in groups and one said he 'became smarter because there were teachers and friends to help' (School C, Year 5-6). This indicated that learning in class may have increased self-confidence for some students.

In summary, Year 4 to 8 students in the focus groups experienced mixed emotions when they returned to school. They mainly felt happy to be seeing their friends again. Many felt annoyed by social distancing rules that were imposed to keep students and staff safe, as it impacted their closeness and usual social practices with friends. For some, there was a sense of relief to not be learning online anymore, with in-class learning with a teacher and peers increasing self-confidence. It was clear that well-being in this phase centred largely around the reconnection and closeness to friends.

At the time students participated in the focus groups

Feeling happy

Students used a range of words associated with happiness and well-being to describe how they felt at the time of the focus groups: 'happy,' 'really happy,' 'super happy,' 'amazing,' 'excited,' 'like it now,' 'better,' 'good,' 'great.' While a small number of students still felt some sadness about losing some of the benefits of lockdown, happiness was the predominant emotion expressed about this time.

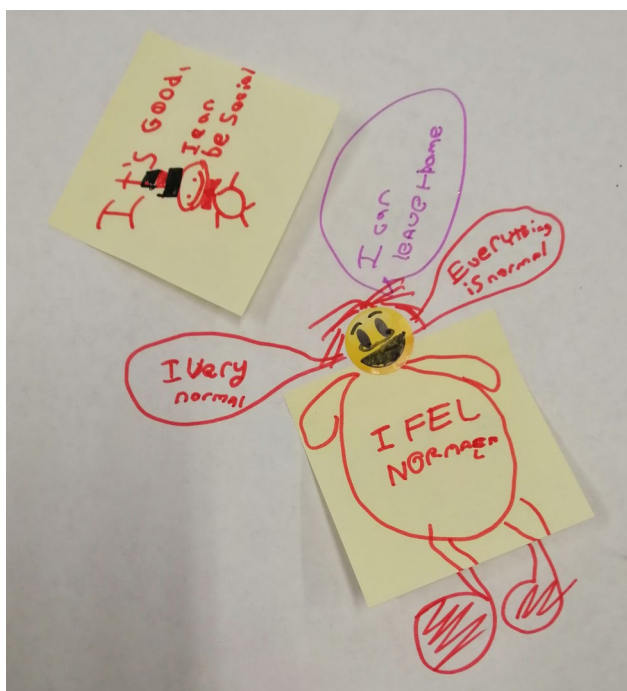
Artwork by a Year 6/7 student (School E)



Back to normal

Students in the research tended to compare the time of the focus groups ('now') with returning to school, the lockdown period, and pre-COVID-19 times. In the lower North Island where the schools were located, there were no cases of COVID-19, although there had been occasional outbreaks and regional lockdowns elsewhere. With little concern of catching COVID-19, no lockdown, and no social restrictions in schools, students frequently described themselves or life as back to 'normal', 'almost normal,' or 'as normal as it is ever going to be.' This is illustrated in the following drawing below. This period was also more predictable. 'You know what is going to happen every day' (School E, Year 4).

Picture by Year 7/8 student (School A)



More freedom with friends

Across the schools, students said they were 'really, really happy' to be able to be with friends. We get to socialise with friends more" (School B, Year 7-8). Also, they did not have to socially distance any more: "I'm happy that we don't have to be two metres apart anymore" (School A, Year 4). "It feels normal again – there is no social distancing in school" (School C, Year 7-8). This meant that they could 'play games' and 'hug' friends (School A, Year 4). As one student wrote, "I now wake up ready for the day and can't wait to see my friends" (School C, Year 5-6). Interestingly, one student said that they had 'got better at being good with friends,' as they had experienced 'time to think about how to be good friends' (School B, Year 7-8). Being able to see their friends without any restrictions was a recurrent message across the focus groups.

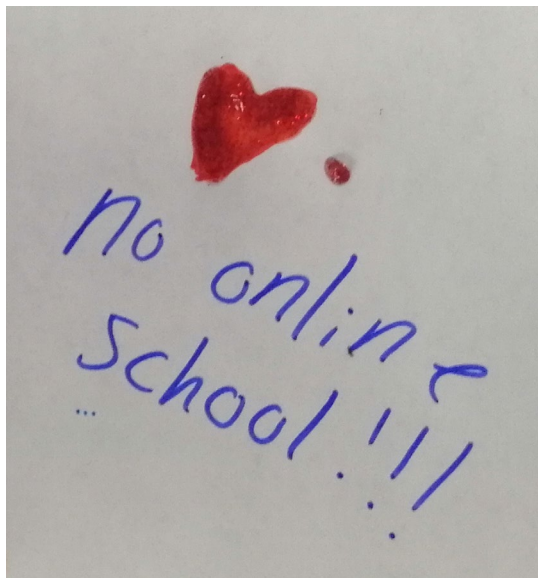
Other freedoms

As well as seeing their friends, there were other freedoms, including being able to go places and "do more stuff than when we just came back from lockdown" (School B, Year 7-8). Students were 'happy because we can go out to places like Kmart and restaurants' (School B, Year 7-8) and do more sport "so you can get more fit now" (School C, Year 5-6). One student said, "I prefer now because I can be with my friends and do things with my horses" (School B, Year 7-8). Some were also "glad that we don't have to line up to buy things" as sometimes happened during lockdown (School C, Year 7-8). "I feel normal now, there aren't any more changes – just like pre-COVID-19" (School A, Year 7-8). 'No more restrictions!' (School A, Year 7-8). However, the COVID-19 situation overseas, and the travel restrictions for New Zealand at the time of their participation, were noted with sadness as students could not see relatives who lived overseas (School C, Year 5-6).

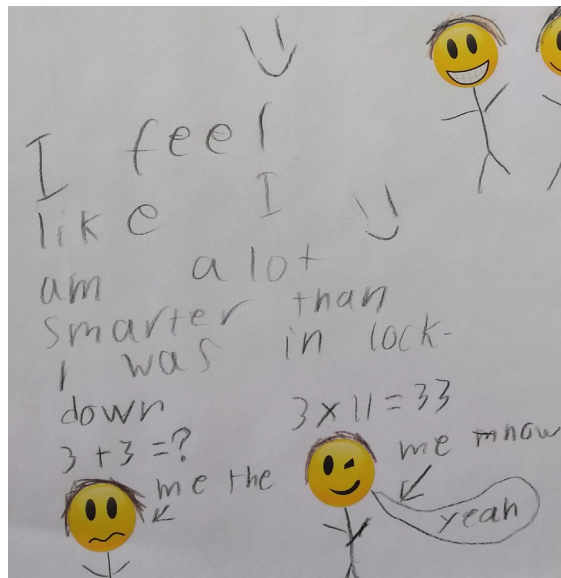
Learning and well-being

A small number of students spoke or drew about their feelings as they related to the current learning context. One student's drawing (see below) indicated she loved the fact there was "no online school!!!" now (School B, Year 7-8). Another student wrote, "I now feel a lot smarter than I was in lockdown," which suggests that face-to-face learning support in the classroom increased his self-confidence (School C, Year 5 to 6).

Art and writing by a Year 7/8 student (School B)



Art and words by a Year 5/6 student (School C)



However, equally common was reminiscence about the benefits of learning in lockdown. One student had liked that there was 'no routine' and you could 'fill your lunchbox as much as needed,' which one 'can't do now' (School C, Year 5-6). Another was 'sad because lockdown is over' and 'you have to share' resources (School B, Year 7-8). Homework was now expected too: "Not so good [now] as we have to do homework" (School C, Year 4). Comments like this indicated that exposure to a different kind of learning during lockdown – one with more flexibility, autonomy, and freedom to do other activities – was still fondly remembered and preferred by some students. This left them feeling less enthusiastic about schooling at the time of the focus groups. 'It's boring because there is too much schoolwork' (School E, Year 4). Interestingly, no students indicated any concern or stress about being behind with their learning, which contrasted with teacher concern about this.

In summary, Year 4 to 8 students in the focus groups were mostly happy at the time of the focus groups because they and life felt 'normal' again. Their well-being seemed to be enhanced by knowing COVID-19 was under control and they and their community were safe. It was also improved by them having the freedom to socialise and go places (i.e., no restrictions). While not discussed much, some students were pleased that online learning was behind them, and some noticed a potential boost in self-confidence from being back in the classroom environment. Other students preferred the flexibility, autonomy, and freedoms they had experienced while learning from home during lockdown. It was clear that well-being in this phase centred largely feeling safe, free of restrictions, and connected to friends.

Key themes across the three Phases

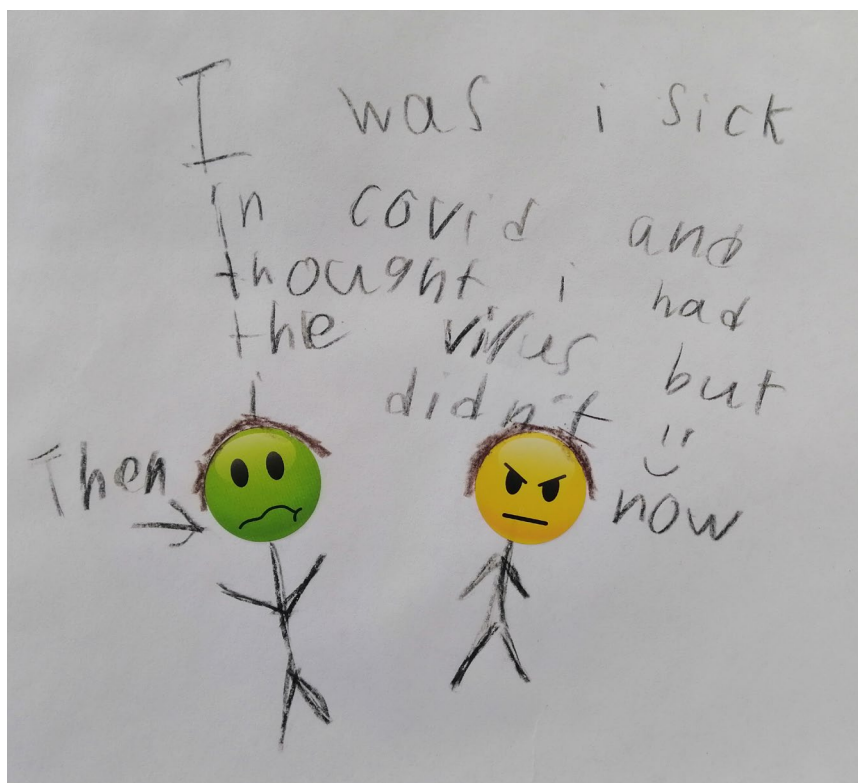
There was much diversity in how Year 4 to 8 students experienced the impacts of various responses to the pandemic, including the national lockdown, the return to school, and the period after that (up until August 2021). Their reported sense of well-being also appeared to vary too, partly due to the fit between the student and the specific environment. Importantly, these themes apply to Year 4 to 8 students in a region of New Zealand with relatively low community transmission and low burden of disease. Consequently, care needs to be taken not to overgeneralise the impacts of different phases of the pandemic on students' well-being, nor on the factors that evidently supported their well-being.

Notably, for each phase of the pandemic response, students drew on their own experiences and made comparisons between phases. For example, when describing the lockdown, students noted how it was different to pre-pandemic times; when describing the return to school, students noted how it was different to the national lockdown phase; and when describing the period of the focus groups, students compared it with pre-COVID-19 times, lockdown, and when they returned to school. Evident from the diverse descriptions of pandemic experiences, and student comparisons between different phases, were five key themes related to these students' well-being. These were: *worry about safety and changes; restrictions and isolation; freedom and autonomy; friendship and connection; and quality family time.*

Worry about safety and changes

Evident in students' accounts of national lockdown and returning to school were feelings of worry. Students worried about the spread of coronavirus and its ability to cause serious illness and death. They knew that many people were dying from it in other parts of the world, and with the virus circulating in New Zealand around the time of the national lockdown, some were scared about catching it. Illustrated below, one child described getting sick and worried he had COVID-19 during lockdown. Another student felt worried that her mother might become seriously ill from COVID-19 while she was living overseas. Students also reported feeling nervous about being exposed to coronavirus on their return to school, which was also evident in studies from UK (Nottingham EPS & Southend Educational Psychology Service, 2020; Phoenix Educational Consultancy, 2020). As mentioned earlier, one student was so nervous that her tummy felt sick.

Art and words by a Year 5/6 student (School C)



Worry about key transition points in the pandemic were also evident. Some students in the focus groups described feeling worried when the national lockdown occurred as it was sudden and unfamiliar, and they did not know what was happening. Although overseas studies report on a range of concerning behaviours by children (Luitjen, 2021; Patrick et al., 2020), students in this project had a more mature view of the situation and seemed to understand that the lockdown was in fact a helpful way to stop the spread of bugs and keeping them safe. Indeed, wider family factors such as breaches of the requirement to stay in separate bubbles, not being able to see loved ones, changes in job status because of the pandemic, did make some students nervous, but when things went 'back to normal,' and the risk of catching coronavirus reduced considerably in their communities, students reported feeling much happier.

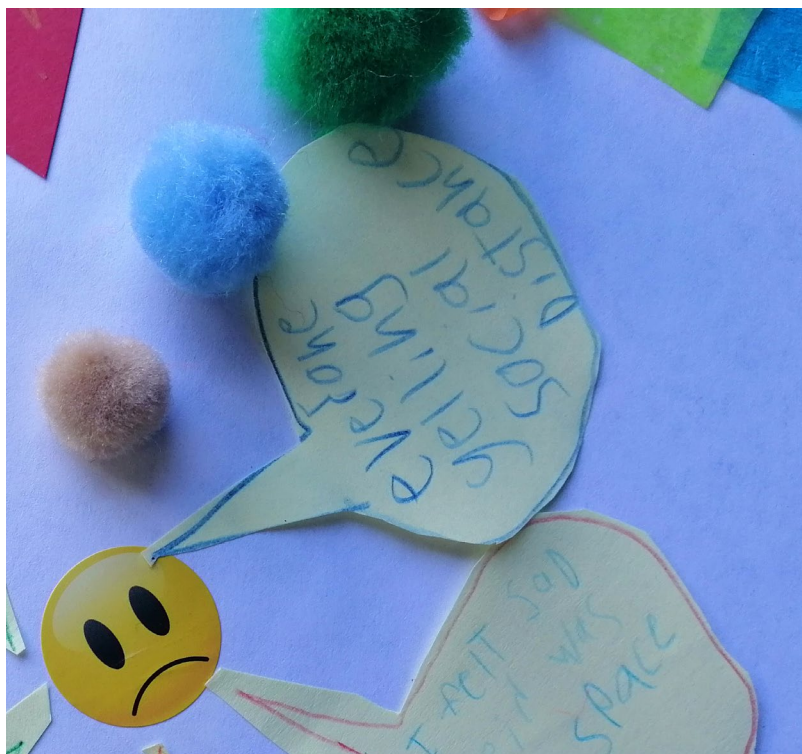
Restrictions and isolation

Another main theme across the focus groups related to pandemic-related restrictions, first during lockdown and then on their return to school. During lockdown, restrictions meant they were confined to their homes, which negatively impacted their freedom to visit places that were important to them and to socialise with friends and family members outside their bubbles. Students disliked feeling trapped at home and isolated from many of the key persons in their lives – and they described feeling bored, annoyed, angry, sad and/or unhappy about this. Luckily for many, the ill effects of being isolated were balanced by having more quality time with family. Also, some students and families got ‘fresh air’ by playing in their backyards and going for walks – and some also stayed connected with friends and family members outside their bubbles through phone calls and social media.

When New Zealand lowered its pandemic alert level, a whole set of restrictions lifted, including the requirement to stay at home. At the time of the focus groups, the Lower North Island’s low alert level meant that students experienced few if any restrictions on their lives. The overwhelming sense of happiness that life had returned to normal (i.e., no restrictions and no worry about coronavirus) gave insight into the how restrictions had frustrated students during the earlier phases of the pandemic response. Travel restrictions still caused sadness for some students in this phase, as they could not see relatives who lived overseas.

However, to lower the risk of outbreaks and community transmission, students were subject to a new set of rules and restrictions on their return to school, including social distancing in the classroom and/or playground. While social distancing increased student and teacher safety, it restricted their proximity to friends who they were excited to reconnect with and talk to. The restrictive nature of social distancing featured in discussions and art during the focus groups.

Artwork by Year 5/6 student (School C)



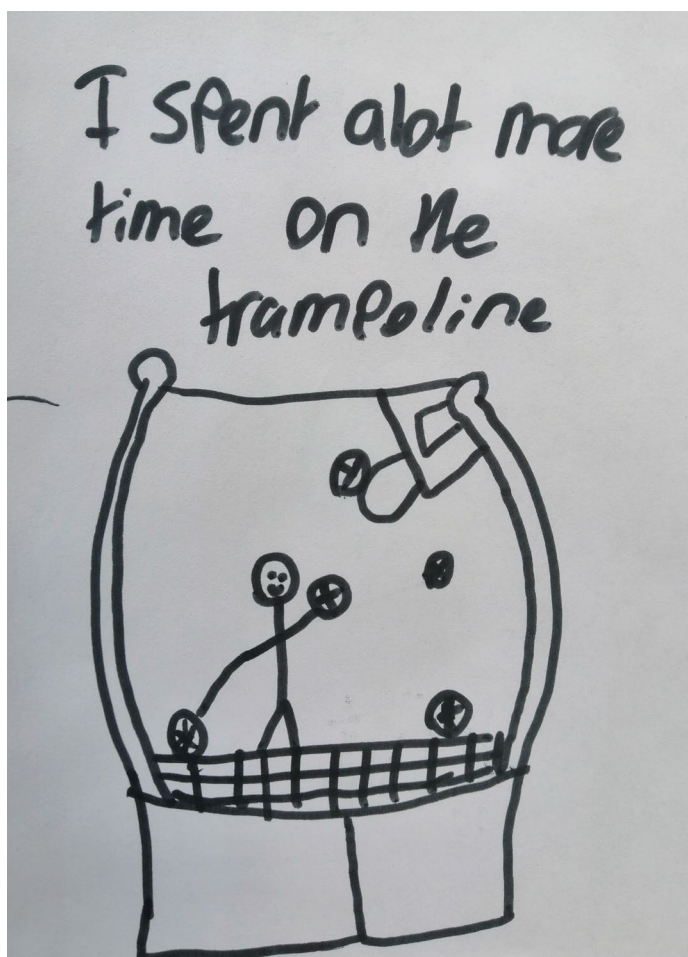
Students largely reported these restrictions as hard, annoying, and sad as they complicated usual social practices and impeded their ability to be close and affectionate with friends. Social distancing restrictions also impacted some students’ proximity to teachers, and this was reported to complicate their ability to get learning support. Interestingly, the aspect of social distancing on returning to school has not been a feature of reviewed international literature, as staggered transitions seem to be the more preferred way of minimising resurgence of the virus (Phoenix Educational Consultancy, 2020). However, overseas studies have also identified restrictions and isolation being problematic for students (Girl Guiding 2020).

Freedom and autonomy

Another key theme, evident in the focus groups, related to the role that freedom and autonomy had on children's well-being over various phases of the pandemic. This included children's freedom to learn, play, see friends, and be with family.

During lockdown, students liked the fact that timetabling became more flexible, which meant that they felt more in control of when they did their schoolwork, which mirrored the findings in overseas studies during this period (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Children's Commissioner of Wales, 2020; Di Gioia et al., 2020; ERO, 2021). Some liked completing their assigned schoolwork by midday or all of it early in the week, with the rest of the day (or week) to play or pursue other activities; others enjoyed sleeping in and starting later than usual. The freedom and more time to play and engage in enjoyable activities - independently or with siblings and parents/caregivers - was greatly rejoiced and was a key discussion point about their time in lockdown. Notably, many students were sad and annoyed to lose the extra freedom to play and be with family when they returned to school.

Drawing by Year 5/6 student (School C)



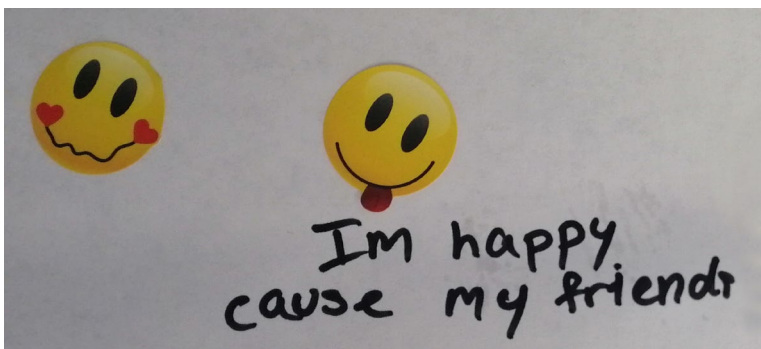
The lowering of New Zealand's alert level and the end of lockdown offered the opportunity to be with friends and go places again. These social and spatial freedoms were clearly very important for students and their well-being, as they enabled students to experience the benefits of friendship and of participation in enjoyable activities outside the home (e.g., going to shops or the beach, riding horses with friends). Freedoms continued to increase as alert levels and associated restrictions eased. Students spoke positively about having social distancing at school behind them; things were 'back to normal' and socialising with friends was even easier. Students reported being happy about the freedom to go places and do things with their friends. The shorter lockdown period of six weeks mitigated the otherwise exacerbated social and emotional behaviours in children and young people noticed overseas (Luitjen, 2021; Saladino et al., 2020)

Friendship and connection

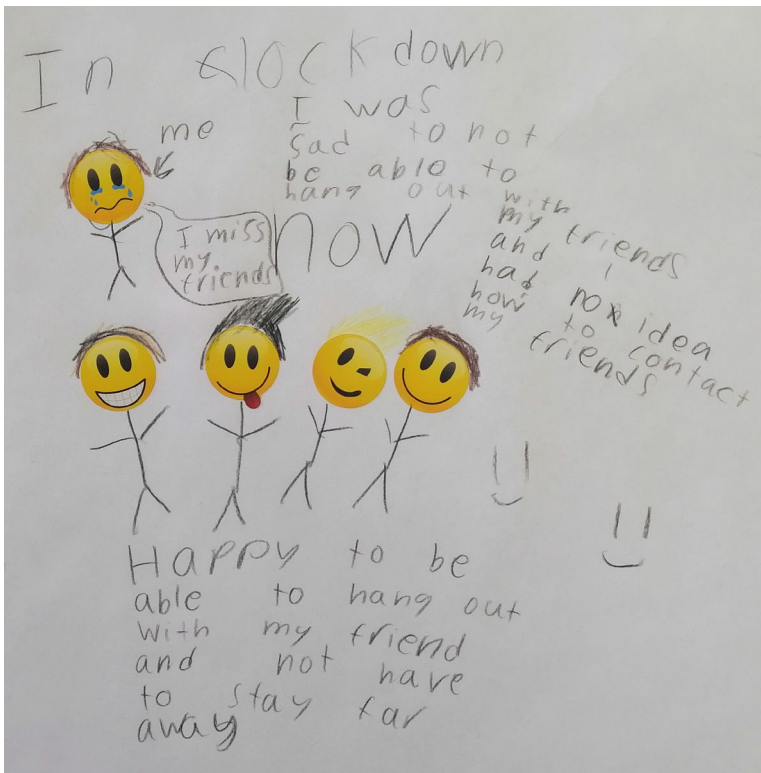
A key theme across all focus groups was the importance of friendship and connection with peers for their well-being, which seemed a universal yearning (Stoecklin et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2021). The importance of friendship was salient during the lockdown, on the return to school, and at the time of the focus groups. During the lockdown, students spoke about missing face to face contact with friends, playing together and having sleepovers. Some managed to keep in contact via phone and social media, which was actively promoted by teachers overseas (Stoecklin et al., 2021).

On returning to school, they were excited and happy reconnecting with friends again. While social distancing tended to impact their proximity to each other school and frustrate them, this was no longer required at the time of the focus groups, it was not surprising that socialising with friends was reported as their highlight. Overall, it was clear that friendship and connection was a cornerstone to their happiness and well-being when they returned to school and at the time of the focus groups.

Art and words by Year 7/8 student (School B)



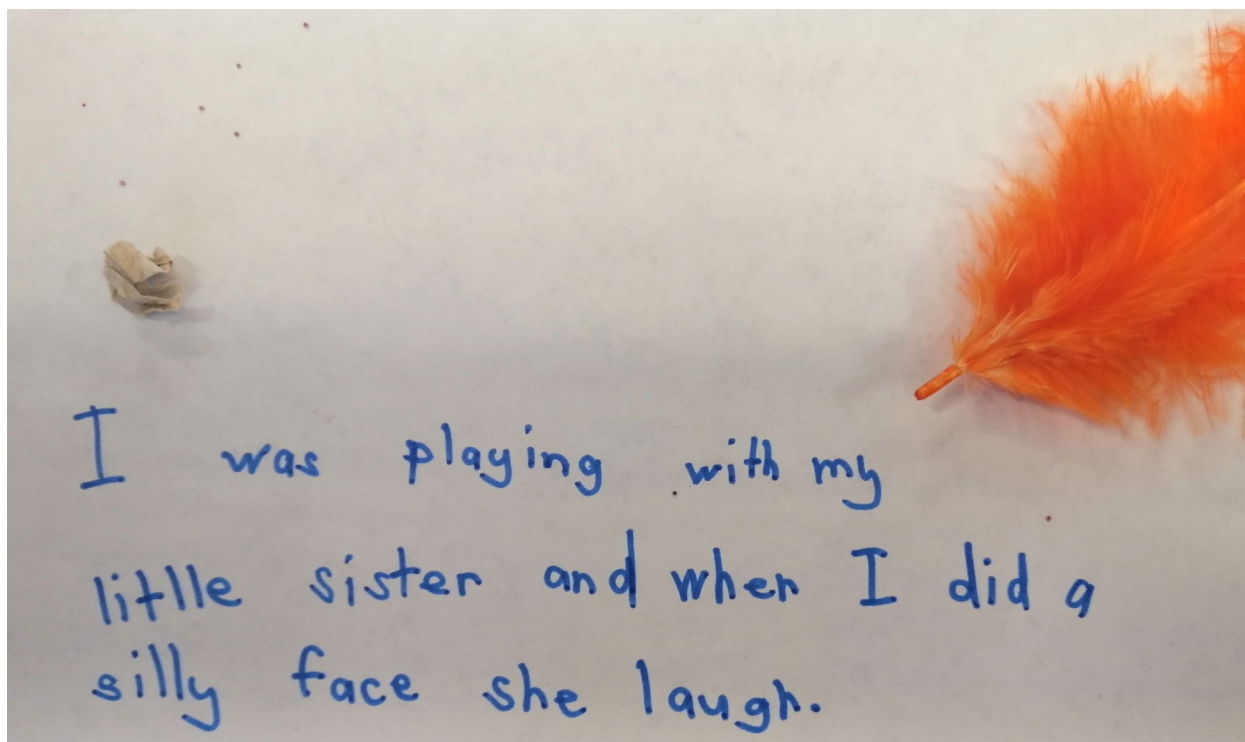
Art and words by Year 5/6 student (School C)



Quality family time

Quality family time also featured in students' accounts during the focus groups. Although family circumstances (reduced income levels and job losses) were a reality both here and overseas (ERO, 2021; Children's Commissioner, 2020; Patrick et al., 2020), and quality time with family members outside of their bubbles was disrupted, many students highly valued the extra time with parents/caregivers and siblings during lockdown, as ordinarily the amount of time together was affected by school, work, and siblings' extracurricular activities. They expressed happiness about doing fun things together, such as walking or playing with the dog, playing games, dancing, singing, and baking together. When students returned to school, quality family time with those in their home was missed, which resulted in some students feeling annoyed or sad. For some students, quality family time was still remembered and perceived as a key benefit of lockdown and something they missed at the time of the focus groups. Overseas research has also pointed to the importance of quality family time for students (Stoecklin et al., 2021).

Art and words by Year 4 student (School A)



One of the heart-warming aspects of the students' insight on the role of their pets in reducing their sense of isolation. The affection and intimacy of patting and cuddling up to cats and other pets was especially important to some students. Students loved having more quality time with their cats, dogs, horses, guinea pigs, and/or rabbits, and spoke fondly about walking, riding, and interacting with them. For students in rural and semi-rural areas, horses featured predominantly in their accounts of the lockdown, as well as when they returned to school and participated in the focus groups. Quality time with family pets/animals was clearly beneficial to their social emotional well-being.

Conclusion

The first lockdown in March 2020 in Aotearoa New Zealand and the months afterwards were the focus of this project, although there have been intermittent lockdowns in different parts of the country since then. The themes reported both from the teachers and students' perspectives are strongly interconnected and seems more arbitrary in terms of presenting the findings. The speed in which the initial lockdown occurred caught the schools off-guard, as until then there was no precedent to pivoting school learning to an online platform en-masse. Teachers in this project went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that students' learning was disrupted as little as possible, including providing hardcopies for students alongside resources provided by the Ministry of Education (2020), especially for disadvantaged families. Teachers mustered up their digital literacy skills but had to be circumspect in their expectations of students to engage digitally every day. They factored in the realities of the families and their school community, including the affordability of digital devices. This was compounded in families where one laptop was shared among siblings. The technology inequity meant that teachers often had to be online for longer, which has been found in other research studies (ERO 2021).


Although teachers were under scrutiny by parents/caregivers, they provided much needed support for some families' well-being. One of the factors that eased the stress of families and students during lockdown was the reduced academic expectations for students and an increased focus on their holistic well-being. This was in spite of teachers feeling the pressure of the possible regression of some students' formal learning. The teachers also had the support of their schools to de-accelerate the academic learning focus during the lockdown period. The teachers acknowledged all the learning and quality time that students had with their family doing activities such as cooking, baking, riding, hiking, helping in the farm and so on, to be equally important for the well-being of their students. The invaluable insights of the lived experiences of students were *funds of knowledge* that teachers felt would inform their ongoing planning to create meaningful lessons for their students.

In fact, one of the standout features of this project was how readily teachers accepted that there was more to student well-being than their academic work. There was no pressure on families, some of whom were adversely affected by the pandemic, to ensure that their children were on top of their studies. This is in sharp contrast to overseas studies where the loss of academic time and the push to 'make up' is strongly heard. Instead, there was an increased focus on student well-being when they came back to school as teachers understood the family circumstances of their students. Students' more informal learning was validated and appreciated by teachers, as well as the need for them to re-connect with their peers and re-establish social connections. The apprehension that students had about being infected by COVID-19 was noticeable and teachers were perceptive and responded to ensure safety and emotional support, rather than focusing on the curriculum. It would not be remiss to say that the holistic way of viewing individuals that is so embedded in te ao Māori values, were demonstrated by these teachers.

At the same time the lockdown provided teachers the much-needed time and space to reflect on their personal well-being and resilience. The forced pause in face-to-face with students meant that they had more time to focus on things that they enjoyed doing, and to also reposition the way that they had traditionally viewed teaching and learning. There was a growing sense of awareness on the importance of their own well-being.

Interestingly, some teachers like their students, felt more anxious in returning to school with the pandemic still present in communities across the country. They saw themselves as *frontline workers* but were not considered to be a *priority group* for vaccinations. This required them to have a heightened sense of keeping themselves and their students safe. Students, on the other hand resented the social distancing enforced in some schools as they had missed the social aspect of schooling during lockdown along with the time flexibility, they had to do their schoolwork. Teachers made it their priority to focus on the well-being of students as part of their day-to-day teaching and learning situations, to build resilience among students and reduce their lingering anxiety and fears around the pandemic.

In conclusion, while the pandemic did pose challenges at multiple levels for teachers, these teachers like many others across the country stepped up beyond their traditional role of teaching. Their level of care for their students was extended to family and whānau as if by default, with well-being of their students becoming embedded in the well-being of their wider whānau and family.



As we conclude writing this report, the Omicron variety has made many schools close on a needs basis as students and teachers are still encountering the virus. There is still uncertainty about the future of the pandemic with emerging mutations and an evolving governmental/national response to this. But the lessons learnt from the initial lockdown has created an increased sense of responsibility among teachers to steadfastly foster resilience among their students and support their well-being. To sustain this level of emotional support for their students, teachers require ongoing support both personally and professionally. There is ample evidence pointing to teacher burnout even prior to the pandemic. Without ongoing systemic support at this critical period, can have a significant impact on the well-being of the teaching profession.

The researchers acknowledge that the ongoing effect of COVID-19 is likely to continue to affect the well-being of teachers and students and more longitudinal research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the pandemic on teacher and student well-being.

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